

Thank you for your comment, Matthew Wunder.

The comment tracking number that has been assigned to your comment is SolarM60211.

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Solar Energy Development PEIS
Comment ID: SolarM60211

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Attachment: 12810 Solar PEIS.doc

Comment Submitted:

The original and signed copy of the attached document will follow in the mail. It was sent from our office on Friday Sept 11th but may have a post mark of Friday Sept 14th.

GOVERNOR
Bill Richardson



**DIRECTOR AND SECRETARY
TO THE COMMISSION**
Tod Stevenson

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11 September 2009

Solar Energy PEIS
Argonne National Laboratory
9700 S. Cass Avenue, EVS/900
Argonne, IL 60439

Re: Notice of Availability of Maps and Addition Public Scoping for Solar Energy Development PEIS; NMDGF Project No.12810

To Whom It May Concern:

In response to the Federal Register Notice dated 30 June 2009, the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish (Department) has reviewed the maps and supplemental information relative to the PEIS. The US Department of Energy (DOE) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are preparing this PEIS to evaluate utility-scale solar energy development in six Western states. The agencies will conduct in-depth environmental analysis of 24 solar energy study areas for the purpose of determining whether such areas should be designated as Solar Energy Zones, specific locations determined best suited for large-scale production of solar energy. Applications for development received after 30 June 2009 for lands inside the Solar Energy Study areas will be subject to the Record of Decision (ROD) for the Solar PEIS and any alternative procedures developed by BLM for non-competitive and competitive processes. Three of the study areas are located in New Mexico.

Utility-scale solar energy facilities in general offer little opportunity, once sited, for minimization of adverse effect to other resource values. For this reason, the Department recommends that compensatory mitigation be considered for all unavoidable losses of quality wildlife habitat whether on or off of Solar Energy Zones. Both the Afton study area and the Oro Grande area south of Red Sands contain stands of native tobosa grass in draws or swales, which should be avoided if possible and mitigated if not avoidable. We also recommend avoidance of ephemeral drainages or draws with dense woody vegetation, which serve as valuable songbird nesting habitat. If impacts to large blocks of intact native habitat cannot be avoided, minimize fragmentation by siting any solar development at the edge, rather than in the middle of the area. Project-specific environmental reviews should include consideration of the impact on hydrologic balance (local surface drainage).

Mason Draw

The Department recommends that Mason Draw be withdrawn from consideration as a Solar Energy Zone. We make this recommendation due to the presence of large areas of intact native grassland habitat of the Chihuahua Semi-Desert Grasslands type, a key habitat identified in the New Mexico Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS). Some areas of woody plant invasion existing on the Mason Draw have good potential for habitat restoration. This recommendation comes directly from a prioritized conservation action in the CWCS which is to:

“Work with public and private land managers and the energy industry to encourage energy development in a manner that preserves the integrity and functionality of Chihuahuan semi-desert grasslands and restores disturbed sites.”

Mason Draw also supports populations of antelope, quail and doves, and is considered a popular and high-quality hunting recreational resource located near the population center of Las Cruces.

Afton

The Department recommends that the Afton study area is suitable for designation as a Solar Energy Zone. It consists almost entirely of mesquite coppice dune habitat, a degraded habitat type resulting at least in part from long-term impacts of excessive grazing pressure. There is very little potential for restoration as most of the soil has been blown away and there is little seed source left. Dona Ana County is currently in non-attainment status for air quality due to dust; dust management by a solar facility operator on the Afton may contribute to air quality improvement. Hunting activity is low and commercial developments already exist in the area.

Red Sands

Red Sands receives considerable recreational use. It is in near proximity to population centers in Alamogordo, El Paso and Las Cruces. Opportunities exist for big game, small game and furbearers. It is also highly popular for ATV and motorcycle users, and hosts an annual motorcycle endurance race which attracts 150-200 contestants from several states. OHV safety training is also held on the area. The BLM Tri-County Resource Management Plan considers Red Sands for possible designation as a Special Recreational Management Area. Red Sands may be suitable for a Solar Energy Zone, due to extensive surface disturbance. However we would recommend the BLM consider the implementation of Instruction Memorandum (IM) No. 2008-204 to require compensatory mitigation for loss of recreational opportunity and wildlife habitat. IM No. 2008-204 allows for the use of off-site mitigation where impacts of the proposal cannot be mitigated to an acceptable level onsite and the authorization as submitted would not be consistent with land use plan decisions or other important resource objectives.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this National Environmental Policy Act scoping notice. If there are any questions, please contact Rachel Jankowitz at 505-476-8159, or rjankowitz@state.nm.us.

Sincerely,

Matthew Wunder, PhD
Chief, Conservation Services Division

cc: Ecological Services Field Supervisor, USFWS
Pat Mathis, SW Area Habitat Specialist, NMGF
George Farmer, SE Area Habitat Specialist, NMGF