

My View: Solar development and deserts can – and must – coexist

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The [Mojave Desert](#) is a vital resource to California and the nation. Its 25 million acres embrace important desert ecosystems, historic, scenic vistas and diverse recreation areas.

This vast area also contains one of the world's premier solar energy resources. Combined with proximity to large and growing urban centers, and relatively easy access to scarce existing transmission lines, this resource is a unique California asset.

To put this energy potential in perspective, developing only 2 percent of the land area in the Mojave Desert to produce solar energy would generate enough power to meet peak electricity load for the entire state.

California has long been the nation's leader in renewable and solar energy, until very recently producing almost 100 percent of the solar energy consumed in the United States. The first commercial-scale solar generating station was built in California in the 1980s.

The facility continues to generate clean energy today, demonstrating both the commercial reliability of solar energy and the unsurpassed quality of California's solar resource. In 2003, California continued its environmental leadership by

enacting the nation's most aggressive renewable portfolio standard. It requires utilities to meet 20 percent of their portfolios with renewable energy by 2010, a goal likely to be extended this year to 33 percent by 2020.

Maintaining this leadership will not be easy. Much of the prime land for solar development is already protected by national parks and monuments, and over 16 million acres of the state's agricultural land is encumbered under the Williamson Act, making solar development more difficult to site. Access to transmission is also an issue, as new transmission can take up to 10 years to plan, permit and build.

Nearby Nevada and Arizona, which also boast excellent solar potential, are luring investment dollars, green jobs and the local environmental benefits of clean solar energy away from California.

Given the limited availability of prime solar land and the competition for solar investment dollars from neighboring states, California must take steps to preserve the full economic and environmental value of its solar resource. Currently planned and contracted solar projects in California's deserts will produce up to 50,000 green construction jobs, an estimated \$30 billion in direct [capital investment](#) in California, and decades of clean energy produced for California in California.

Recent arguments that utility-scale solar projects will harm pristine desert habitat tend to overstate the extent of development and land use needed to meet the state's goals. Of

course, there are large pristine areas of desert that should and can be protected from development. But there are also areas in the desert that have endured decades of human encroachment, and many planned solar projects target these areas.

The future of California's deserts and our nation depend on addressing these issues in a thoughtful and balanced manner. [Climate change](#) represents the single greatest threat to sensitive desert habitat, to humankind and to our economy. We have the technology and the mandate to address this challenge today. If managed wisely, development of environmentally responsible solar projects in California's deserts can both serve as a model for sustainable growth, and provide future generations with clean energy, jobs and a protected wilderness environment.

Shannon Eddy is executive director of the Large-Scale Solar Association, a nonpartisan solar [advocacy group](#) based in Sacramento whose purpose is to advance the utility-scale solar market through progressive policy mechanisms.

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