

Analysis of DRECP Draft EIS/EIR Potential Impacts to Recreational Rockhounding



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Background

Currently, over 7 million acres in the California desert are open to utility scale renewable energy development. Both Congress and the State of California have legislated renewable energy targets. President Bush and Governor Schwarzenegger signed an MOU initiating the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, or DRECP.

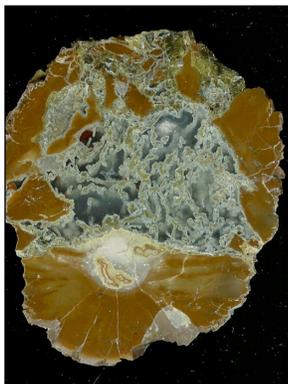
The goal of the DRECP is to encourage utility scale renewable energy development in designated areas of the desert by providing streamlined take permits for approximately 40 species of federal and state concern, such as the desert tortoise, Mojave ground squirrel, numerous birds, plants and reptiles, and even some species of fish.

This report analyzes the DRECP's draft EIS/EIR with respect to recreational rockhounding, including:

- casual use, which is informal and unorganized use by members of the public, usually among individuals, family members, and friends
- organized use by clubs
- organized used for special events

There are three categories of potential affects on recreational rockhounding:

- the loss of collecting areas, or access to collecting areas, from the resulting utility scale renewable energy development
- the loss of collecting areas, or access to collecting areas, from the resulting conservation management actions
- educed availability of Special Recreation Permits (SRP's) for organized rockhounding events



Moss Agate



Rainbow Ledge Jasp-Agate

Renewable Energy Development under the DRECP

The DRECP's draft EIS/EIR describes one Preferred Alternative, four other action alternatives, and a No Action Alternative, which would be no DRECP at all.

The Preferred Alternative seeks to avoid renewable energy siting conflicts with sensitive resources and existing uses by designating Development Focus Areas (DFA's) primarily on previously disturbed lands with the lowest biological value. As a result, nearly 80% of DFA acreage is located on private and non-federal property, and just 20% is located on BLM-managed public lands.

On private property, renewable energy projects are ultimately permitted by local city or county officials, and the BLM issues permits for projects on BLM managed public lands.

Some popular and documented rockhounding sites are located in these proposed DFA's and access to the sites, or the sites themselves, may someday be affected by development.

Interestingly and positively, the DRECP also proposes a first-time mitigation requirement for lost or impacted recreational activities resulting from renewable energy development in a DFA. Specifically how these potential impacts would be mitigated is not discussed in the draft EIS/EIR and project planners would like to hear suggestions for how a project might mitigate the loss of a known or popular rockhounding site, or access to that site.



Myrickite



Red Jasper

Conservation and Recreation Under the DRECP

In order to offset the impacts of renewable energy development on 177,000 acres, DRECP will put into place a conservation strategy across 6 million acres of mostly BLM lands. Conservation measures focus on protecting sensitive resources, both natural and cultural, and on protecting existing uses, particularly recreation.

Resource conservation on public lands in the DRECP is achieved through 147 existing, new, and expanded Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC's), and the designation of 4 million acres as National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) lands. ACEC's should be familiar to desert rockhounds as many have been in place since the 1980. NLCS designations, however, were created by Congress in 2009, and the DRECP introduces NLCS to BLM lands in the desert. Renewable energy development is excluded in ACEC's and on NLCS lands.

Protections for resources and recreation in the DRECP are spelled out by numerous Conservation Management Actions (CMA's). The CMA's for NLCS lands and the new and expanded ACEC's are generally free of impacts on recreational rockhounding under casual use. However, the availability of Special Recreation Permits (SRP's) may be negatively affected for events on NLCS lands and in some ACEC's. Although the DRECP would not directly close any roads, it may require road closures within future route designation and travel management plans in the desert.

Protections for recreation on public lands are garnered primarily through the designation of 41 new and existing Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMA's) and Extended Recreation Management Areas (ERMA's). Under the DRECP, BLM would managed these lands with an emphasis on recreation.

The CMA's for SRMA's and ERMA's protect recreation by maintaining connectivity among roads and trails, managing the affects of adjacent renewable energy projects to maintain dark skies, and by requiring activity level plans that emphasis management for recreational uses, including rockhounding. The availability of SRP's for groups and events would not be negatively affected, and are proposed to be streamlined within some SRMA's.

Renewable energy development is precluded in SRMA's and ERMA's with two exceptions. The first is that geo-thermal development is allowed if a geo-thermal DFA overlays the SRMA and complies with a "no surface occupancy" restriction. Such possibility exists within SRMA's proposed in the geothermal energy rich southern Imperial Valley. The second exception allows renewable energy development where a DRECP variance land designation overlays an SRMA if the project is found to be compatible with the specific SRMA values.

The 41 SRMA's and ERMA's proposed in the DRECP's Preferred Alternative total 3.4 million acres. Some of the SRMA's overlay existing OHV open use areas in order to protect and management them for that type of use. Other SRMA's and ERMA's protect recreation in what we now call Limited Use Areas with designated roads and trails, including the areas most popular for desert rockhounding. In fact, one such SMRA is the Chemehuevi Valley Rock Collecting and Touring SRMA, and the National Trails Viewshed SRMA designates the Trilobite and Ship Mountains Rock Collecting Area Recreational Management Zone (RMZ). SRMA's also designated for BLM's Long Term Visitor Areas (LTVA's), one protects a popular wind sailing area, one protects the Pacific Crest Trail in the desert, and one is for the Desert Discovery Center on BLM land in Barstow. ERMA's are proposed only within the Preferred Alternative.

Myths Regarding the DRECP

Myth #1: The DRECP will locate utility scale solar and wind projects throughout the desert, spoiling the remote areas that are home to traditional and popular rockhounding sites.

Response: Remember, only about 20% of DFA's are on BLM managed public lands. Therefore, it would be mostly rockhounding sites on private land that might be affected by renewable energy development in DFA's. Further, most of the DFA's on BLM lands were already designated for solar energy development under the 2012 Federal Solar PEIS. So, development is focused primarily on private lands, and conservation is focused primarily on public lands.

Myth #2: The DRECP will bring utility scale renewable energy development to millions of acres throughout the desert.

Response: Although the Preferred Alternative designates 2 million acres as DFA's, the estimated footprint for the 20,000 megawatt planning target is 177,000 acres. This is to provide some siting flexibility within DFA's for renewable energy developers.

Myth #3: The DRECP will permit projects proposed in DFA's.

Response: The DRECP does not authorize any projects, nor does it override local zoning and land use planning. Local county and city governments still approve projects on private property, and BLM still approves projects on public lands. Rather, the DRECP merely satisfies the environmental analysis required for state and federal take permits covering approximately 40 species of concern. Therefore, the DRECP does not trump the approval powers for projects on either private or public land, nor does it streamline requirements for site specific impacts, or impacts to state and federal species of concern other than the approximately 40 species covered under the plan.

Myth #4: The DRECP will close roads and trails which are used to access rock collecting and other recreational sites.

Response: The DRECP will not close any roads directly. The proposed CMA's for NLCS lands do require that future route designation plans emphasize travel on routes that provide enjoyment of ecological, cultural, and scientific values. Therefore, road closures on NLCS lands are possible for the future, but not immediately upon approval of the DRECP.

Myth #5: The DRECP will prohibit recreational rock collecting in the desert.

Response: Rockhounding under the DRECP is prohibited only within the Indian Pass, Horse Canyon, and Calico Early Man Site ACEC's. Additional prohibitions are proposed for collecting fossils in the Coyote Mountains Fossil Site ACEC, vertebrate fossils and petrified wood in the Lake Cahuilla ACEC, vertebrate fossils in the West Mesa and Yuha Basin ACEC's. CMA's for the Marble Mountain Fossil Bed ACEC call for the identification of non-commercial hobby beds for public collecting.



Recommendations

Use of this Analysis

Appendix A – Analysis: Rockhounding Sites

Read and understand the potential impacts to the 88 rockhounding sites analyzed for this report, and develop comments with respect to minimizing or elimination negative impacts to recreational rockhounding at these locations. These rockhounding sites were compiled from:

Gem Trails of Southern California by James R. Mitchell (1986 and 1996 editions)

Desert Gem Trails by Mary Frances Strong (1971 edition)

Spreadsheet of 19 rockhounding locations provided by ALAA members

This analysis includes site maps for the Preferred Alternative generated from the Data Basin DRECP Gateway website which features interactive maps from the draft EIS/EIR.

Appendix B – Analysis: NLCS Lands

Read and understand the highlighted CMA's for NLCS lands, then apply them to the in's and out's of recreational rockhounding, both for casual use and events. Then, write comments suggesting changes to the CMA's for NLCS lands with respect to minimizing or eliminating negative impacts to recreational rockhounding. CMA's for the proposed NLCS lands are different for each action alternative within the DRECP, and the boundaries and acreage of proposed NLCS lands vary among the action alternatives.

Appendix C – Analysis: ACEC's

Read and understand the highlighted CMA's for each of the 147 existing, expanded and new ACEC's proposed by the DRECP. CMA's may be the same or different among each ACEC, but CMA's are the same for all action alternatives. This analysis includes ACEC maps for only the Preferred Alternative, but the acreage and boundaries for each ACEC may vary for each action alternative. CMA's and maps for each ACEC are provided in the BLM Worksheets in Appendix L.

Appendix D – Analysis: SRMA's & ERMA's

Read and understand the highlighted CMA's for each of the 41 existing and new SRMA's and ERMA's proposed by the DRECP. CMA's may be the same or different among each SRMA or ERMA, but CMA's are the same for all action alternatives. This analysis includes SRMA & ERMA maps for only the Preferred Alternative, but the acreage and boundaries for each SRMA and ERMA may vary for each action alternative. (ERMA's are proposed only within the Preferred Alternative.) CMA's and maps for each SRMA and ERMA are provided in the BLM Worksheets in Appendix L.

Recommended Comments

1. Rockhounding within DFA's

Some rockhounding sites and their access roads are within DFA's and other potential development zones and, therefore, could be lost to renewable energy development. Although such losses of recreational opportunities would require mitigation, there are no specific strategies defined for this within the DRECP .

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Request boundary revisions for DFA and other development zone boundaries to exclude affected rockhounding sites.
2. Provide specific suggestions as to how to mitigate the loss of rockhounding sites, or access to the sites, resulting from renewable energy development in DFA's and other development zones.

2. Rockhounding within CPA's

Some rockhounding sites and their access roads may be located on private property within proposed Conservation Planning Areas (CPA's). If such lands are acquired for conservation using developer fees, these rockhounding sites and their access roads may be closed by state or federal wildlife management agencies that administer the CPA's.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Request that recreational rockhounding be allowed at existing collecting sites within CPA lands that are acquired for conservation.
2. Request that roads and trails within CPA lands that provide connectivity to a designated route network on adjacent lands remain open for recreational use both before and after being acquired for conservation.

3. SRP's for Rockhounding

SRP's for rockhounding club outings and events may become limited or unavailable for activities on NLCS lands and within some ACEC's.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Request that SRP's for rockhounding events remain available for activities on NLCS lands and within ACEC's, especially if within an SRMA or ERMA.
2. Request the adoption of the CMA from Alternative 1 for Recreation and Visitor Services on NLCS lands which allows competitive and commercial SRP's.
3. Request a reduction in NLCS acreage to that proposed in Alternative 1.

4. Rockhounding within ACEC's

CMA's for some ACEC's may affect even casual rockhounding as a surface or resource disturbance activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Request that recreational rockhounding that occurs as a casual use not be negatively impacted by proposed CMA's for the ACEC's.
2. Where collecting sites exist in ACEC's, request that rockhounding be specified as an allowable use.

5. Rockhounding within SRMA's and ERMA's

The DRECP proposes SRMA's in all action alternatives, however, ERMA's are proposed only in the Preferred Alternative.

RECOMMENDATION

Request that ERMA's be included in the final plan.

6. Rockhounding Sites

Several known rockhounding sites are located not within a SRMA or ERMA, such as the Hauser Geode Beds. Some of these rockhounding sites may be located within ACEC's or on NLCS lands which afford protections from renewable energy development, but the CMA's for these designations may restrict or preclude some forms of rockhounding such as events.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Request that specific rockhounding sites be included within SRMA's or ERMA's in order to protect them from renewable energy development and adverse CMA's.
2. Request that the Hauser Geode Beds area covered under MOU with the BLM El Centro Field Office be included within a SRMA or ERMA.

7. Roads on Conservation Lands

Roads and trails on NLCS lands or within ACEC's currently used to access rockhounding sites may be subject to closure in future route designation and travel management plans.

RECOMMENDATION

Request that the CMA for Comprehensive Trails and Travel Management on NLCS lands allow designated routes that provide for enjoyment and enhancement of recreation values in addition to those associated with ecological, cultural, and scientific values.

8. Renewable Energy Development on Private vs Public Lands

The Preferred Alternative proposes that less than 20% of DFA's be located on public lands.

RECOMMENDATION

Support plans to focus as little renewable energy development as possible on public lands, locating project instead on previously developed private lands with the least resource values.

9. Lands Managed for Recreation Emphasis

The Preferred Alternative doubles the amount of lands managed for recreation emphasis from 1.5 million acres currently to 3 million acres under the DRECP, and protects them from renewable energy development.

RECOMMENDATION

Support plans to increase lands managed for recreation emphasis and exclude them from renewable energy development.



Fire Opal



Petrified Wood



Contact

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Sundance Media is the oldest and largest independent communications & digital services firm in the Northern Los Angeles area. Our effective messaging strategies and efficient digital delivery systems combine to create highly successful campaigns and work flows.

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