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BLM Solar Plan Jeopardizes the Future of the Amargosa River Basin

Hundreds of Thousands of Acres of Wildlife Habitat Put on the Chopping Block

LAS VEGAS, Nev.— The Bureau of Land Management released the final proposed Western Solar Plan today, which will guide solar energy development on public lands for the next several decades. The plan would open up 33 million acres of public lands across the Western U.S. to solar development.

While large-scale solar projects are an important component of our clean energy transition, improperly-sited projects can cause negative impacts to wildlife, water resources, and nearby communities.

The Amargosa River watershed of Nevada and California, one of the most biodiverse places in North America, is squarely in the crosshairs of this plan for a massive proliferation of solar energy development. Roughly 300,000 acres of the watershed is proposed for solar development in the plan released today.

“The Amargosa River watershed is an irreplaceable gem of the Mojave Desert, and we can’t let it be destroyed for industrial energy development,” said Ashley Lee, Board President of the Amargosa Conservancy. “We support solar energy as an important part of the clean energy transition, but it can’t come at the expense of our most special places. The communities and endangered species of the Amargosa are vulnerable to the harms that such widespread development would bring.”

The Amargosa River watershed is home to almost 50,000 people, in the communities of Pahrump, Amargosa Valley, Beatty, and nearby towns in California. With household incomes well below the national and regional average, and a legacy of toxic waste pollution, these are the definition of environmental justice communities. Under this plan, some areas designated for solar come right up to hundreds of peoples’ homes and fence lines.

The proposed plan would also jeopardize the protected areas that make the Amargosa so special. Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge would be surrounded on two sides

by solar projects. Death Valley National Park could have nearly 40 miles of its border lined with solar projects.

All solar projects consume water, primarily during the construction phase, sometimes as much as 1,000 acre-feet or more. (An acre-foot is 325,000 gallons.) With over two dozen solar projects already proposed in the Amargosa, that's a potential withdrawal of over 8 billion gallons of water from the vulnerable groundwater aquifer which sustains the Amargosa River. The proposed solar plan would exacerbate these concerns.

"The communities of the Amargosa River watershed have made themselves quite clear: they do not want these projects in direct proximity to their homes as observed at the last town hall meeting," said Lee. "There are better ways to site these projects to minimize impacts to communities and biodiversity, but this plan falls short."

There are numerous private landowners in the community of Amargosa Valley, Nevada whose current agricultural operations may not be sustainable in light of declining groundwater in the area. Opportunities for mutual benefit by converting some of these lands to solar energy and retiring the water rights provide a potential win-win-win for solar development, biodiversity conservation, and community benefits.

"Have the BLM thought about exploring unique opportunities, such as a public-private partnership with landowners in the Amargosa, as part of this plan?" asked Lee. "We're concerned that the revision of the Western Solar Plan seems to continue with the usual approach, and we're concerned that without more careful consideration, the communities and biodiversity of the Amargosa River watershed might be negatively impacted."

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