



DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL

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Via email only

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Coolwater-Lugo Scoping Comments
c/o Aspen Environmental Group
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RE: Scoping comments on the proposed Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/EIS) for the Coolwater-Lugo Transmission Project, Application No. A.13-08-023.

The Desert Tortoise Council (Council) is a private, non-profit organization comprised of hundreds of professionals and laypersons who share a common concern for wild desert tortoises and a commitment to advancing the public's understanding of this species. Established in 1975 to promote conservation of tortoises in the deserts of the southwestern United States and Mexico, the Council regularly provides information to individuals, organizations and regulatory agencies on matters potentially affecting the desert tortoise within its historical range.

Purpose for the Project. The intent and function of this new project must be well defined: Is it intended to alleviate a transmission bottleneck and transmit energy from the existing Kramer to Lugo Substations, as stated on page 1 of the Notice of Preparation (Notice)? Or, is it intended to support future renewable energy projects throughout the region surrounding Barstow, as the Council believes? If it is the latter, the EIR/EIS must fully analyze the growth-inducing nature of this project on the regional occurrence of desert tortoises.

Alternative Alignments. During a public workshop on 12 March 2012 in Hesperia, California, a Southern California Edison (SCE) spokesperson indicated that the project was necessary because SCE anticipates a buildup of energy at Kramer Junction that cannot be distributed further south, to the Lugo Substation, using existing facilities; that these new facilities, including 55 to 70 miles of new transmission lines and two new substations were needed to accommodate new energy production.

In March 2012, the Council recommended that there be an alternative that would transfer energy directly from Kramer Junction to Lugo Substation within the existing utility corridor along Highway 395. The spokesperson indicated then that there were "too many residences" between Kramer and Lugo for this alternative to be realistic. However, there may be just as many residences between Lucerne Valley and Hesperia, which would be revealed by environmental analysis. We reiterate now as we did then that the EIR/EIS must consider a direct alternative from Kramer to Lugo, which we believe would have much less likelihood for growth inducement of renewable energy development on sensitive desert tortoise habitats around Barstow compared to the Proposed Transmission Route shown in the Notice.

One persisting concern of the Council is the push to establish renewable energy projects on public lands versus private lands. We understand that approximately 15.4 linear miles of the Proposed Transmission Route would cross public lands managed by the Barstow Resource Area of the BLM. The Council believes that BLM and California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) should identify an alternative that avoids new impacts to public lands, particularly those that are being managed for desert tortoise, like the Ord-Rodman Desert Wildlife Management Area (DWMA). If there is no way to restrict impacts to private lands, then BLM and CPUC should document that no such alternative exists.

We understand from the Environmental Assessment that “Overwhelmingly, the greatest concentration of active tortoise burrows was discovered along Proposed Transmission Line Segment 1,” which bisects the northwestern portion of the Ord-Rodman Critical Habitat Unit and DWMA. It is not clear why an alternative along Highway 247 between the Proposed Transmission Line Segment 1 and Barstow, which would completely avoid bisecting the DWMA, will not be analyzed. The Council feels strongly that an alternative that follows Highway 247 from Barstow all the way to Lucerne Valley must be included in the analysis, even if it is judged to be an “alternative considered but rejected from further consideration.” Locating the new transmission line along Highway 247 would minimize impacts and likely avoid adverse modification of critical habitat in the Ord-Rodman DWMA to the east and minimize socioeconomic impacts in the Stoddard Valley Open Area to the west.

At the March 2012 workshop, SCE indicated that previous public input from fall 2011 discouraged development of an alternative along Highway 247. The Council does not believe that such an alternative should be dismissed because of early public input, especially since it has not undergone rigorous environmental analysis. This well-traveled highway has already significantly impacted adjacent tortoise populations (LaRue, personal observation), and placement of the new transmission line alongside Highway 247 would place it within this depletion zone. Regardless of previous public input, the Council believes that the EIR/EIS must analyze a route along Highway 247 from Barstow to Lucerne Valley as an alternative.

Similarly, we believe that an alternative should be analyzed in the EIR/EIS that coincides with Interstates 40 and 15, between Daggett and Hesperia. If this is an alternative that has been considered and rejected, then reasons for that rejection should be reported. Otherwise a complete analysis of this alternative is warranted.

We note that Alternatives 8 and 9 would avoid impacts to the Ord-Rodman DWMA. In March 2012, SCE personnel indicated that impacts on the Nebo Logistics Marine Corps Base would fatally flaw Alternative 9. Rather than assume this, the EIR/EIS should analyze this assumption and not dismiss Alternative 9 as infeasible; it takes rigorous analysis to determine what is feasible or not.

Project-Related and Growth-Inducing Impacts. It is misleading that each of the alternative transmission lines in the Notice is portrayed as a point-to-point project, when, in fact, this project would function as transmission infrastructure for numerous future wind power and solar projects. The EIR/EIS must analyze the growth-inducing impacts associated with all alternatives. We assume that BLM and CPUC are familiar with the concept of “but for,” as in “*but for* this project, projects x, y, x could not exist?” How many approved and pending renewable energy projects, mostly on public lands managed by the BLM, will be enabled by this project?

The Council understands that there have been proposed wind power projects along Daggett Ridge to the north; Stoddard Ridge, Sidewinder Ridge, Granite Mountains, Fairview Mountains to the southwest; and San Bernardino Mountains to the south. There are also proposed solar plants in the region between Fort Irwin to the northwest, centrally-located Yermo, and east to Ludlow. Although some of these proposed developments, like wind power on Daggett Ridge and the Calico solar fields near Ludlow, have been dismissed, others remain potentially viable. A transmission line developed between Kramer Junction and the Lugo Substation (to alleviate the bottleneck) would not accommodate any of these projects like the current proposal, between Barstow and Lucerne Valley, would. The EIR/EIS must be clear as to what the intent of this project is. Is it to transmit energy from Kramer Junction to Lugo Substation, or, as the Council believes, is it to provide transmission for foreseeable renewable energy development from regions surrounding Barstow?

In the EIR/EIS, BLM and CPUC must fully disclose all renewable energy projects that will be supported by this project. Impacts to tortoises, adverse modification of critical habitat, and other resources resulting from these related projects must be considered in the impacts analysis. For example, if new towers are placed at 1/8-mile intervals, along a 63-mile transmission line, and each tower affects a half acre, the new line would ostensibly impact only 252 acres. Yet, the new windmills, solar fields, roads, and ancillary lines connecting to the transmission line would cumulatively affect thousands of acres. So, BLM and CPUC's analyses must disclose and determine the total acreage affected by associated projects, and not just the footprint of the transmission line, telecommunication lines, and substations.

Survey results from these associated projects supported by this project should be included in the EIR/EIS. Since so many solar and wind energy projects could connect to this project, the Council would like to see results of these related surveys included in the baseline surveys and analyses presented in the EIR/EIS. As mentioned elsewhere, impacts are not restricted to the particular corridor that may be developed; they also extend to other projects that would not, in the absence of this transmission line, be developed.

We understand from the Notice that 43.6 of 63 miles would be parallel to or occur within existing corridors. Unfortunately, approximately 16 of the 20 linear miles of the Proposed Transmission Route would run through the most densely-populated tortoise habitats in the Ord-Rodman DWMA. Having identified this population segment ahead of time, why isn't this segment being dropped from further consideration?

Although the Notice shows the Lugo-Pisgah #1 220 kV line as existing, it does not depict BLM-designated transmission corridors established in the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan, as amended. We ask that the EIR/EIS maps clearly depict BLM utility corridors, the Ord-Rodman DWMA, desert tortoise Ord-Rodman Critical Habitat Unit, Stoddard Valley Open Area, and other BLM-designated areas, such as sensitive raptor breeding areas, relative to each alternative.

Cumulative Effects Analysis. In addition to project-supported energy development enabled by SCE's proposed project, it is important that BLM and CPUC complete a detailed cumulative effects analysis of other foreseeable projects in the region. In particular the expansion of the 29 Palms Marine Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC) is of concern. As this 180,000-acre expansion is implemented, there is the likelihood of displacing off-highway vehicle recreation from the BLM-managed Johnson Valley Open Area into the adjacent Ord-Rodman DWMA, which would be further impacted by the proposed project and associated renewable energy projects. The Proposed Transmission Route between Daggett and Highway 247 could become a focal point for these displaced recreational users and result in increased impacts to tortoises.

The Council assumes that the EIR/EIS will analyze the relationship between this project and the draft Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP), which is likely to be issued before the draft EIR/EIS is circulated. Is this project specifically identified as one of the "covered projects" in the DRECP? Do BLM and CPUC expect this project to be authorized as part of the DRECP if it passes first, or will this project be considered independently of the DRECP?

Common Raven Issues. The Council asks that the following questions be addressed in the EIR/EIS analysis: Does SCE have a monitoring program in place to see if common ravens are nesting on existing lines in the affected region? If so, how many raven nests are built each year? How many show evidence of raven predation on tortoises? Is there any intent to monitor raven nesting on these new lines, and measures to be implemented to remove offending ravens?

We also believe that impacts should be mitigated, in part, by participating in the Common Raven Management Working Group. Other public utilities groups (e.g., Joshua Basin Water District in U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biological opinion issued in February 2011) have volunteered to provide \$105/acre to the Common Raven Management Working Group. The Council suggests that participation in this program is appropriate for this project. If not already, does SCE plan to participate in this program?

The Council appreciates the opportunity to provide input. We ask that you identify us as an affected party, and that we be given notice of future opportunities to provide input.

Thank you for considering our concerns,

Regards,



Edward L., LaRue, Jr., M.S.
Desert Tortoise Council, Ecosystems Advisory Committee, Chairperson