

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

**Finding of No Significant Impact
Environmental Assessment
Environmental Assessment Number: 0021
Case File Number: CACA 053213**

July 2015

Blythe Mesa Solar Project

Location: Unincorporated Riverside County and City of Blythe, California

Applicant/Address: *Renewable Resources Group
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Introduction

This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) addresses the issuance of right-of-way (ROW) grants under Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), 43 United States Code (USC) Section 1761, for a portion of the 230 kilovolt (kV) generation interconnection (gen-tie) line and related infrastructure that would traverse lands under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Palm Springs – South Coast Field Office (Alternative 3 or the Selected Alternative). The Selected Alternative is needed for grid connection of the development proposed by Renewable Resources Group (“Applicant”) of a solar energy generation facility on 3,253 acres of privately owned land under the jurisdiction of Riverside County and 334 acres under the jurisdiction of City of Blythe, to be known as the Blythe Mesa Solar Project (the “Project”). Authorizations for ROW grants are regulated by BLM in accordance with 43 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Section 2800 et seq., consistent with Department of the Interior (DOI) and BLM policies and the California Desert Conservation Area Plan (CDCA Plan) (1980, as amended).

In addition to the direct and indirect impacts of the Selected Alternative, the underlying environmental review and this FONSI also consider the effects of the non-Federal connected actions required for the Project, which include: the proposed solar power generating facility, substations, private land segments of the access road, and ancillary facilities located on private lands. For purposes of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the non-federal components of the Project are analyzed as a connected action because the solar facility must interconnect to the electrical grid via a gen-tie line; without a ROW to construct the gen-tie line on BLM-managed land, the solar facility site would not be able to transmit power.

In connection with the ROW request and as a result of the public/private land configuration of the Project, a joint Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Assessment (EIR/EA) was prepared to meet the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and NEPA. The County of Riverside is the lead agency for CEQA purposes, and the BLM is the lead agency for NEPA purposes. The conclusions in this FONSI are based on the analysis in the EIR/EA. The EIR/EA is incorporated by reference in this FONSI. The Blythe Mesa Solar Project EIR/EA is available in hardcopy at the BLM Palm Springs – South Coast Field Office, 1201 Bird Center Drive, Palm Springs, California 92262, or online at:

http://www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/fo/palmsprings/Solar_Projects/Blythe_Mesa_Solar_Power_Project

The County of Riverside Board of Supervisors held a public hearing and issued a decision on the Blythe Mesa Solar Project on May 12, 2015.

Project Description

The Applicant has proposed to construct, operate and maintain, and decommission an up to 485 megawatt (MW) alternating current solar photovoltaic (PV) electrical generating facility and associated infrastructure to provide site access and connection to the statewide electricity transmission grid. The

power produced by the Project would be conveyed to the local power grid via interconnection to the Southern California Edison (SCE) Colorado River Substation, a substation located south of Interstate 10 (I-10) and approximately four miles west of the Project site. Renewable Resources Group has secured a California Independent System Operator (CAISO) interconnection queue position sufficient for the size of the Project. The Project would produce enough energy to power approximately 180,000 households and progress the goals of the California Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) and other similar renewable programs in the state. The Project would also assist in meeting President Obama's Climate Action Plan, which set a goal of issuing an additional 10 gigawatts of renewable electric generation on public lands by 2020.

The Applicant has requested a 125-foot-wide, 3.8-mile ROW on BLM administered land for the construction and operation of the gen-tie line and associated infrastructure needed to connect the solar generation facility with the electrical grid. The EIR/EA analyzed four action alternatives. The BLM has identified Alternative 3, Northern Alternative 230 kV Gen-tie Line, as the Selected Alternative. The Selected Alternative includes: (1) 5.2 mile length across BLM-administered land for construction, operation, maintenance, and decommissioning of an above-ground 230 kV gen-tie line; (2) a gen-tie maintenance road located on lands administered by the BLM (7.54 acres of disturbance); (3) pole installation; (4) conductor installation; (5) tensioning/pulling sites on BLM managed land (4.68 acres of disturbance); and (6) installation of overhead ground/fiber optic communications systems. The BLM portion of the ROW application area contains 78 acres.

The Selected Alternative includes construction, operation, and potential decommissioning of an up to 485 MW PV solar energy generation facility and associated infrastructure. It would occupy a total of 3,665 acres and would utilize the same solar array field as the Project as proposed by the Applicant. The primary difference between the Project as proposed and Alternative 3 is the location of the portion of the 230 kV gen-tie line that extends outside of the solar array field to the Colorado River Substation (the same 230 kV gen-tie alignment within the solar array field would be utilized for either Alternative). The gen-tie alignment for either Alternative would be located within or adjacent to the same BLM utility corridor; however, Alternative 3 would be located on the north side of the proposed gen-tie alignment and within a 125-foot ROW entirely on BLM-managed lands. Like the proposed gen-tie alignment, the Alternative 3 alignment would be entirely within the Riverside East Solar Energy Zone where it is on BLM-managed land and therefore easier to administer mitigation actions identified in Appendix Q of the EIR/EA. Similar to the applicant's proposal, at the end of the energy sales contract term of Alternative 3, if the utility buyer is not available for extension or another energy buyer does not emerge, the solar arrays and gen-tie line could be decommissioned and dismantled within the Project area. Following decommissioning and dismantling of the solar facility and gen-tie, the Alternative 3 site would be made available for reversion to agricultural use.

Finding of No Significant Impact Determination

Based on a review of the EIR/EA and the supporting documents, I have determined that the Selected Alternative is (1) not a major federal action and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively; and (2) in conformance with the following statutes and plans: FLMPA and CDCA Plan. Per the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations, 40 CFR 1508.27, whether a proposed action significantly affects the quality of the human environment is determined by considering the context and intensity of the action and its effects. No environmental effects associated with the Blythe Mesa Solar Project meet the definition of significance in context or intensity as defined in 40 CFR 1508.27. If the federal agency prepares an EA and determines that the proposed federal action does not have the potential to significantly affect the quality of the human environment, then NEPA allows the agency to prepare an EA and FONSI rather than an environmental impact statement (EIS) (40 CFR 1501.4). Therefore, an EIS is not required. My finding that Alternative 3 will not significantly affect

the quality of the human environment is based on the context and intensity of the Project as described below.

Context

In NEPA “context” means the consideration of the significance of an action in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend on the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short and long term effects are relevant.” (40 CFR 1508.27(a)). Here, the context of Alternative 3 points to no significant unmitigated environmental impact considering the following:

1. The Alternative 3 solar generation facility is proposed on land already disturbed by past activities including agriculture. The gen-tie line will result in some, but not substantial amounts, of new areas of disturbance. As discussed in the EIR/EA, the extent of new areas of disturbance will be minimized through project design features and mitigation measures provided in the EIR/EA.
2. Alternative 3 is a site-specific action directly involving a total gen-tie length of 8.8 miles (including federal and non-federal land); 3.6 miles would be located on private lands within the array site boundary and 5.2 miles would be located outside the solar plant site boundary on BLM-managed lands. The BLM portion of the ROW would contain 78 acres.

Intensity

The term “intensity” refers to the severity of a proposed action’s impact on the human environment (40 CFR 1508.27(b)). In determining an impact’s intensity, NEPA’s implementing regulations direct federal agencies to consider the following ten factors, each of which is discussed below in relation to the Proposed Action.

1. *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*

The Selected Alternative would result in beneficial and adverse impacts that are within the type and intensity of impacts analyzed in the Blythe Mesa Solar EIR/EA. Beneficial impacts would include the replacement of fossil fuel-fired power facilities with a solar power facility that would generate negligible air pollutant and greenhouse gas emissions in comparison (EIR/EA Section 4.2.7, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, p. 4-201 et seq.).

Examples of potential adverse impacts of the Selected Alternative include the following:

- Conversion of farmland to non-agricultural use (EIR/EA Section 4.2.2, Agriculture)
- Temporary increases in criteria pollutant emissions during construction (EIR/EA Section 4.2.3, Air Quality);
- Long-term impacts to approximately 303.6 acres of creosote bush scrub habitat and approximately 23 acres of riparian woodland wash (EIR/EA Section 4.2.4, Biological Resources);
- Removal and degradation of Harwood’s woollystar and Harwood’s milk-vetch habitat and temporary removal and degradation of up to 67.7 acres of Mojave fringe-toe lizard habitat (EIR/EA Section 4.2.4, Biological Resources);
- Removal and degradation of marginal foraging habitat for golden eagles (EIR/EA Section 4.2.4, Biological Resources);

- Displacement or damage of prehistoric and historic archaeological resources that may be on the surface or hidden below grade and could physically remove surface remnants of the World War II-era Blythe Army Air Base (EIR/EA Section 4.2.5, Cultural Resources);
- Ground disturbance related to construction could potentially degrade water quality through the inadvertent release of residual pesticides from former agricultural lands (EIR/EA Section 4.2.9, Hydrology and Water Quality);
- Unauthorized collection of fossil materials, dislodging of fossils from their preserved environment, and/or physical damage of fossil specimens could also adversely affect paleontological resources (EIR/EA Section 4.2.12, Paleontological Resources); and
- Increased traffic from worker commutes along highway I-10, a regional traffic corridor, and local roads within the vicinity of Alternative 3 (EIR/EA Section 4.2.15, Traffic and Transportation).

The potential for adverse impacts has been reduced by including design features in the Selected Alternative, and the expected implementation of Mitigation Measures Agriculture 1, Biology-1 through -9, Cultural-1 through -5, Geology-1 through 4, Hazards-1 through -3, Hydrology-1 through -6, Noise-1 through-3, Paleontology-1 through -3, Traffic 1 -3 would substantially reduce the extent and intensity of the impacts.

2. *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

Potential impacts to health and safety could occur during any phase of the Selected Alternative. These were analyzed in Sections 3.2.3 and 4.2.3, Air Quality; Sections 3.2.7; 4.2.7 Greenhouse Gas Emissions; and Sections 3.2.8 and 4.2.8, Hazardous Materials. The EIR/EA discussed, analyzed and disclosed potential health, safety, and hazardous materials impacts and determined that there are no adverse impacts under Alternative 3 related to these issues. During construction of the gen-tie line and other components of Alternative 3, construction equipment and vehicles are expected to generate some dust or particulate matter. Diesel particulate matter from heavy construction equipment used on-site and truck traffic to and from the site, as well as minor amounts of toxic air contaminant (TAC) emissions from motor vehicles (such as benzene, 1,3-butadiene, toluene, and xylenes) would also be generated and could impact public safety. Implementation of the mitigation measures described in the EIR/EA will minimize those impacts related to air quality. Similarly, the EIR/EA concludes that Alternative 3 will not result in a substantial increase in hazardous or solid wastes.

3. *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

No unique characteristics of the geographic area or ecologically critical areas would be significantly impacted with implementation of recommended mitigation measures. The potential for Alternative 3 to cause impacts to historical and cultural resources, recreational resources, farmland, wetlands, and sensitive habitat was considered during the EIR/EA process. Two thorough BLM Class III archaeological and historic built environment surveys were conducted in the area that could potentially experience direct impacts from construction and operation of the Selected Alternative. The surveys were conducted to allow any identified cultural and historical resources to be avoided. There are no park lands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas in the Project area. Although the Project would convert approximately 1,700 acres of Prime Farmland to non-agricultural use, the Project's conversion of farmland to non-agricultural use would not result in conversion of other adjacent Farmland to non-agricultural use. The Selected

Alternative would not introduce a non-agricultural use that is sensitive to or incompatible with agricultural operations that would occur nearby. Additionally, Mitigation Measure Agriculture-1 will mitigate for land converted from Farmland to non-agricultural uses.

The site contains a ephemeral channel that bisects the Project, and which could be affected by construction, operation, or maintenance; however, the solar panels would be designed to avoid placement within the ephemeral drainage. Mitigation measures and best management practices (BMPs) would substantially reduce potential impacts.

4. *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The Selected Alternative is located in an area identified in the BLM Solar Energy Program Western Solar Plan (the “Western Solar Plan”, 2012) as a priority area for utility-scale solar energy and associated transmission infrastructure development. In addition, the proposed solar facility would be located on previously disturbed agricultural land as opposed to undisturbed land. The gen-tie line and other federal actions included in the Selected Alternative will be constructed within a previously established transmission corridor (Corridor K) as identified in the CDCA plan. Therefore, the Project is not likely to be highly controversial.

5. *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

The effects of constructing, operating, maintaining, and decommissioning the Selected Alternative as described in the EIR/EA, are well known because BLM has approved 29 utility-scale solar energy projects on public lands since 2010, and the Project does not present any new or novel issues or effects in relation to previously approved actions. There will not be a high level of uncertainty of the possible effects, nor any new unique or unknown risks.

6. *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

The Selected Alternative is located in an area that the BLM has identified in the Western Solar Plan as a priority area for utility-scale solar energy and associated transmission infrastructure development. The Project does not set a precedent for future actions with significant effects and does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration since the relevant action is limited to site-specific action.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.*

The EIR/EA considered various types of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable projects on both public and private land within the geographic area of Alternative 3. Potential cumulative effects were considered in the EIR/EA on a resource-by-resource, issue-by-issue basis. No significant site-specific or cumulative impacts associated with the BLM action or the non-federal connected action have been identified that could not be avoided through mitigation, or that are inconsistent with those identified and analyzed within the above plans and programs.

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

The Selected Alternative avoids direct effects to districts, sites, highways, structures, and objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and would not cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. BLM consulted with Indian tribes, the California State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP). It has been determined that the Project and Alternatives would constitute an “undertaking” as defined in 36 CFR Part 800.16(y) and involve the type of activity that could affect historic properties (36 CFR Part 800.3(a)), BLM as lead federal agency for the Project, has the statutory responsibility for compliance with provisions of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) (36 CFR Part 800.2(a)(2)). The construction, operation and maintenance, and decommissioning of Alternative 3 would not affect any historic properties under Section 106 of the NHPA.

9. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

The EIR/EA analyzed the potential for effects to species listed as threatened or endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act and designated critical habitat for these species. These species include: desert tortoise (threatened), the Yuma clapper rail (endangered), western yellow-billed cuckoo (candidate), southwestern willow flycatcher (endangered) (See EIR/EA Section 3.2.4 and 4.2.4).

- The Project could have direct and indirect effects on desert tortoise. Construction activities that result in direct mortality or the degradation of habitat utilized by this species, if present, would be considered take of a federal-listed species and would constitute an impact that would be authorized only through the context of a Biological Opinion issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). However, in a memorandum dated November 14, 2012, the USFWS stated that the Project as proposed is “not likely to incidentally take or otherwise adversely affect desert tortoise” (FWS-ERIV-12B0299-12I0497, see Appendix M of the Final EIR/EA); therefore, an ESA Section 7 formal consultation is not required. This conclusion is based not only on existing data for the area (habitat and species records), but also on the assumption that the Applicant will comply with a number of avoidance measures that are included in the USFWS memo. Most impacts to tortoises can likely be avoided by the installation of tortoise exclusion fencing that is required by the USFWS memo. While the USFWS memo refers specifically and only to the Project as proposed, the Alternative 3 gen-tie line corridor runs parallel to this with a distance of only 700 feet between centerlines. The Alternative 3 gen-tie line corridor is slightly longer than the proposed corridor and would result in slightly more habitat loss, but otherwise both corridors parallel existing transmission lines and access roads and are expected to have largely the same potential for impacts and the same level of significance for those impacts.
- Suitable habitat for southwestern willow flycatcher, the Yuma clapper rail, and the yellow-billed cuckoo does not occur within or near the Project area and there is no potential for Project-related effects to occur.

10. *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

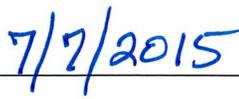
All potentially applicable environmental laws were considered during development of the Project and alternatives to identify requirements and prevent possible violations. Approving Alternative 3 would not violate or threaten to violate any Federal, State, or local law or requirement for the protection of the environment. See EIR/EA Table 1-4 (p. 1-24) for a list of Federal, State, and local permits and other authorizations that may be required for the Project.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the (referenced or attached) environmental assessment, and considering the significance criteria in 40 CFR 1508.27, I have determined that the Blythe Mesa Solar Project – Alternative 3 will not have a significant effect on the human environment. An environmental impact statement is therefore not required.



Authorized Officer



Date