

Working Toward a Regional Mitigation Plan for the Dry Lake Solar Energy Zone (SEZ)

A Conservation Perspective

John Hiatt - Conservation Chair, Red Rock Audubon Society (Las Vegas)

The first point I would like to make is that the Mojave Desert is the most intact native ecosystem remaining in the contiguous United States and it is also one of, if not the most biodiverse. It is also the driest area in the U.S. and hence it has not been especially attractive to settlers and developers, which up to now has allowed it to survive mostly intact based upon a policy of benign neglect.

However, with the development of technologies for capture of solar energy and its conversion to electricity there is great interest in siting major industrial developments in the Mojave. Thus we are now discussing how the impacts of losing large natural areas to development might be mitigated.

It is essential to understand and agree on what is meant by mitigation. In California, the State has proposed that solar energy development be “mitigated” by purchase of private land and turning it over to the BLM (or another federal land management agency) for permanent management. Purchase ratios of 1:1, 3:1 or 5:1 have been suggested as being appropriate. Whether this approach should really qualify as mitigation is debatable since it might also be viewed as just off-setting future loss of habitat and space should that private land be developed. In Nevada, where the great majority of land (87%) is already federally owned, purchase of private property for mitigation is not really an option and is strongly opposed by local governments.

If mitigation is to be meaningful here in Nevada it really needs to include active restoration of already degraded, disturbed or impacted lands. One is then faced with the issues of which lands might be appropriate for restoration and how might that be accomplished. Lands which have been disturbed by a “one time” event without much soil disturbance will generally recover on their own without help. On the other hand, lands which have been heavily disturbed, with loss of topsoil generally require centuries to recover and we generally don’t have much experience in accelerating that process.

At the same time that we are looking at how to mitigate for solar development we are seeing increasing competition for BLM land for other degrading uses, chief among them being recreation, especially near Las Vegas. The biotic community on public land near Las Vegas is dying a “death by thousand cuts” and if it is proposed to protect that community by restricting certain activities then those activities will just be moved to a currently less impacted area, with no net gain.

One of the biggest challenges in any mitigation plan is financial. Who will put up the money and how much is needed? It seems unlikely that the money will come from the Federal Treasury and if mitigation in the SEZ’s is too expensive that will just drive developers to the variance lands, thus negating the whole point of the Solar PEIS.

The ultimate challenge of a regional mitigation plan is how to turn good intentions into meaningful results. This is indeed very difficult and almost certainly will not succeed via a “one size fits all” approach. A lot will be learned in the process of trying to set up a regional mitigation plan for the Dry Lake Solar Energy Zone.