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October 26, 2011

DRECP Preliminary Conservation Strategy

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Purpose and Contents

The Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP or Plan) is being developed by the Renewable Energy Action Team (REAT) to provide for the protection and conservation of California desert ecosystems while providing streamlining of permitting for appropriate renewable energy development projects. The Preliminary Conservation Strategy (PCS) is a benchmark in development of the DRECP and provides the basis for important follow-on work among the REAT agencies and with stakeholders in the development of alternative conservation strategies for the DRECP. The alternative conservation strategies are intended to lead to the selection of a preliminary preferred conservation and implementation strategy for further detailed analysis and consideration in the administrative draft DRECP Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP).

Important elements of the PCS include:

- A PCS map;
- Identification of renewable energy study areas (RESAs);
- Initial plan integration information highlighting relationships between biological and development elements of the PCS;
- Next steps; and
- Documentation of database advancements since the June 2011 distribution of the Framework Conservation Strategy Report (FCSR).

Each of these elements is summarized below.

PCS Map

The PCS map synthesizes available physical, biological, and land use data and is based on key biological elements as identified by the REAT agencies (see PCS Section 2.1 and Figure 2-1). Map categories shown on the PCS map include land use and biological elements.

Land use elements include categories previously discussed with stakeholders as part of plan structure discussions (see the Approach to Structuring the Preliminary Conservation Strategy memorandum, www.drecp.org, posted July 1, 2011), such as Legally and Legislatively and Protected Areas, Other Managed and Designated Areas, and Military

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Lands. In addition, the PCS map depicts off-highway vehicle (OHV) lands and state vehicle recreation areas (SVRA).

Biological elements depicted on the PCS map are described in detail in PCS Section 2.1 (Table 2.1-1) and include landscape/ecological process, natural community, and species elements. The combination of these elements is depicted as Moderate to High Biological Value Areas on the PCS map. The PCS map shows the geographic representation of these areas outside the land use elements noted above. The full extent of the Moderate to High Biological Value Areas within the Plan Area is also depicted in the PCS (Figure 2-2F).

Another biological element of the PCS map is a Condor Study Area depicted as an overlay. This overlay represents the area that has been identified by the REAT agencies members of the California Condor Wind Energy Working Group for further study when seeking to address current and future impacts of wind development on this species. This overlay area does not denote a proposed reserve for the California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*); instead, it identifies portions of the Plan Area where potential effects on the California condor would need to be considered.

Other map categories included on the PCS map are Lower Biological Value Areas and Agriculture and Developed Lands. The Agriculture and Developed Lands categories are derived from the FCSR Initial Land Cover Map and are based on CA-GAP 2008 mapping data. The Lower Biological Value Areas category is essentially a remainder category, depicting lands not included in any of the other PCS map categories.

It is important to note that the PCS map is a **preliminary** step in development of the overall DRECP conservation strategy and does not represent a recommended reserve design or overall conservation strategy, nor does it reflect all data that will be used to develop the strategy. For example, the PCS map does not incorporate draft expert-based species models prepared to date, nor future statistically based species models. Likewise, the PCS map does not reflect the variety of reserve selection modeling tools (PCS Section 2.3) that will be used to assist in development of alternative conservation strategies. It is also important to note that the PCS map does not have regulatory effect and is not intended to govern how projects are reviewed or permitted.

Renewable Energy Study Areas

RESAs are shown as purple polygons on the PCS map. Five RESAs, totaling approximately 3.5 million acres, are depicted on the map in the following general locations: Owens Valley, West Mojave, Barstow, Blythe, and Imperial Valley (see Figure 2-1 and Table 5.2-1). The

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RESAs were identified by the REAT agencies based on consideration of available renewable energy resources and lower biological conflict areas (PCS Sections 4.1 and 4.3). The RESAs may become the primary focus areas for renewable energy development within the DRECP. RESA boundaries depicted on the PCS map are preliminary and subject to change.

Initial Plan Integration

The PCS includes preliminary information highlighting the relationships between the various biological and development elements of the PCS to facilitate discussion of plan integration (see PCS Section 5). Quantitative information is provided summarizing PCS map categories by county, by RESA, and by renewable energy resource category (Tables 2.1-3, 4.1-5, 4.1-6, and 5.2-1). This information provides a framework for continued discussion among REAT agencies and with stakeholders regarding plan structure options and alternative conservation strategy considerations. Providing this information is intended to increase the usefulness of the PCS as a benchmark and stepping-off point for meaningful discussion and analysis of alternative conservation strategies.

Next Steps

Next steps include development of alternative conservation strategies by January 2012 and selection of a preliminary preferred conservation and implementation strategy by February 2012. Next steps are discussed in Section 7 of the PCS. Next steps also include plans for additional science review and integration, which are discussed in Section 6.

In addition to the key elements noted above, the PCS documents ongoing assembly of the DRECP database since distribution of the FCSR. Database additions are presented in detail in the PCS and summarized below.

Additions to the baseline biological data since distribution of the FCSR include the following (see PCS Section 3 and Appendices A through D):

- a. Natural communities classifications “cross-walk” to ongoing DRECP vegetation mapping;
- b. Proposed Covered Species list that reflects initial REAT agencies review and stakeholder comments;
- c. Draft species profiles completed since distribution of the FCSR;
- d. Draft expert-based species models;
- e. Draft gap analyses completed since distribution of the FCSR;

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- f. Additional data assembled since distribution of the FCSR (disturbed and agricultural lands mapping, special features mapping, and other additional data); and
- g. Documentation of comments received on the FCSR and interim work products associated with the PCS to ensure that comments are appropriately addressed in DRECP documents (see PCS Appendix E).

Additions to the baseline renewable energy database since distribution of the FCSR include the following (see PCS Section 4):

- a. Solar development areas provided by the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies (CEERT) and the Large Scale Solar Association (LSA);
- b. Wind resource considerations for the DRECP provided by CalWEA;
- c. Refinement of geothermal resource data based on discussions with CEERT and geothermal industry representatives, including mapped known geothermal resource areas (KGRAs) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) geothermal lease areas;
- d. Refinement of transmission mapping to include approved transmission projects and corridors in the Plan Area; and
- e. The California Energy Commission (CEC) Calculator distributed to the Covered Activities Working Group on October 21, 2011.

It is also important to note what is not contained in the PCS. Elements not included in the PCS that would be part of the later overall DRECP include the following:

- A recommended reserve design, including scalability relative to proposed Covered Activities and permittees;
- A recommended description of Covered Activities, including associated best management practices;
- Alternative conservation strategies to be considered;
- A preliminary preferred conservation and implementation strategy to be analyzed in detail;
- A monitoring and adaptive management plan;
- A cost and funding analysis; and
- A proposed implementation strategy.

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This PCS incorporates data and analyses available at the time of publication (October 2011). As noted in PCS Section 3, additional data could become available during preparation of the DRECP and these data would be incorporated as appropriate. Nothing in the PCS is intended to have regulatory effect or to govern how projects are reviewed under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), or regulatory permitting processes during preparation of the DRECP.

1.2 Relationship of PCS to Overall DRECP Development

The immediate next step in the process is stakeholder review and comment on the PCS.

Additional next steps are discussed in Section 7 and include the following:

- Development of draft alternative conservation and implementation strategies;
- Selection of a preferred strategy; and
- Preparation of the NCCP/HCP Conservation and Implementation Strategy as identified in the DRECP work process diagram. Preliminary cost and funding analysis may also occur as a near-term next step.

Stakeholder input regarding the PCS map and RESAs included in the PCS will be important to guide preparation of the alternative conservation and implementation strategies. Potential items to be considered in the identification and analysis of alternative conservation strategies are highlighted in an October 11, 2011, memorandum titled, Development of DRECP Conservation Strategy Alternatives, which was presented to stakeholders on October 12, 2011, and posted online at www.drecp.org.

A preferred strategy will be selected prior to development of the monitoring and adaptive management plan. The detailed monitoring and adaptive management plan will be prepared only for the preferred strategy.