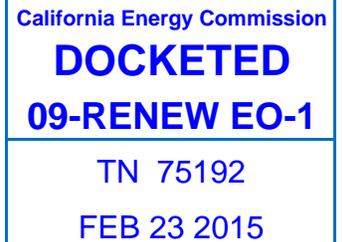


Irene Fisher
Shield F Ranch
PO Box 1837
Barstow, CA 92312

February 21, 2015

Via E-mail docket@energy.ca.gov and First Class Mail

California Energy Commission
Dockets Office, MS-4
Docket No. 09-RENEW EO-01
1516 Ninth Street
Sacramento, CA 95814-5512



RE: Draft DRECP NEPA/CEQA Document and Draft Environmental Impact Report/Statement

Dear DRECP REAT Agencies,

As the owner of the Shield F Ranch (Ranch), I am providing comment on the Draft Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) and Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (dEIS/EIR), California, 79 Fed. Reg. 57971 (September 26, 2014).

Our Ranch is a historic cattle ranch located in the West Mojave Desert southeast of Barstow, California. Our Ranch is made up of 3,146 acres that we own in fee and we hold the lease to the Ord Mountain Allotment, which is a 150,000-acre Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Cattle Grazing Allotment.

My family has been ranching these lands for over 40 years but cattle grazing has occurred on this land for more than 100 years. We are good stewards of the lands entrusted to us because the only way we know how to make a living off this land is by taking care of it — for both our cattle and the wildlife that thrive here. Our Ranch is a viable cattle ranch, raising natural range-fed beef. In the years we have been ranching these lands, we have developed waters and springs throughout the allotment that benefited cattle and wildlife alike, including bighorn sheep and countless other species. In fact, we did not see bighorn sheep in any number in the Ords until we began maintaining the waters when we began ranching here. My family and I are convinced that our work and maintenance of these waters has allowed bighorn sheep to return in number to the Ord Mountains.

What very few people seem to realize in this desert is just how much work ranching families do for the lands. We pick up the slack when BLM doesn't receive funds or have

the staff necessary to do the actions they are required to do to manage the lands. We are the ones managing these lands. We are the ones fixing fences. We are the ones stopping trespass. We are the ones taking off cattle in bad years. We are the ones maintaining waters. We are the ones who know this land inside and out. And as a result, we manage our lands and allotments better than anyone else can and in a way that benefits all species.

The fact that we are good stewards should be evident by the fact that our Ranch is located in the Ord-Rodman Desert Wildlife Management Area (DWMA). This DWMA is a designated critical habitat unit for desert tortoise and has some of the highest desert tortoise populations in the West Mojave Desert, and the highest of the DWMA's. Time and time again, people whose goal is to protect the tortoise have tried to take away our ability to ranch these lands, but we have proven each and every time that cattle grazing is not detrimental to tortoise.

We have a long history of leadership and involvement in desert land use planning efforts including the Desert Protection Act and BLM's 2006 West Mojave Plan (WEMO). We strongly support the guiding principle of these plans to ensure that no one group of desert users is singled out and disproportionately bears the burden of their implementation.

While the 2006 WEMO isn't perfect, it recognized our allotment as an approved land use and gave us the right to continue our livelihood. We have been subject to several Environmental Assessments, the most recent being BLM's 2007 Environmental Assessment for Livestock Grazing Authorization (CA-680-06-78) for the Ord Mountain — which included a Section 7 consultation between BLM and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and several lawsuits from various groups that would like to see our way of life put to an end. The result of all of the reviews by the agencies and the courts is that our ranching activities are not harming the land or the tortoise and we have the right to continue ranching.

DRECP Is Overwhelming and Confusing

Now comes the DRECP trying yet again to get my family off this land. The draft document in circulation is the biggest and absolutely most confusing and disjointed desert land use planning effort my family has ever seen. I wasn't able to read the whole document. To just get through the Plan, I would have had to read roughly 75 pages a day — with no time to figure out what it all meant.

This planning effort — which has been in process 6 years — has not sought out public input until NOW. There may have been meetings but nearly everyone I've talked to feels like the DRECP didn't care to listen or figure out what works. The DRECP affects everyone who lives and works in the desert. It isn't just about renewable energy. It is the entire California desert, all 22.5 million acres. And you've only defined a use for a small piece of it — just 177,000 acres for solar and wind — and then you practically designate

everything else for conservation to keep people out. Never mind all the other land uses and ways all the rest of us, who live and work here, make a living in this desert. We are clearly not important to this planning effort. Frankly, the 151-day comment period is unacceptable. People have to work and earn a living. How are they supposed to read the DRECP? The comment period needs to be extended so we can understand what the document says and how it's going to affect our lives.

No Common Sense

The DRECP acknowledges that the best tortoise habitat in the West Mojave Desert is in the DWMA and allotment. This is not a mere coincidence. As I said before, ***we are good stewards of our lands***. Studies on the effects of light and moderate grazing within desert environments indicate that it has no significant impact to the ecosystem and may actually benefit it. I suggest that you review these studies before you continue with the DRECP effort and wipe cattle grazing off of desert lands.

Despite the fact that the DRECP says it wants to protect the tortoise, it proposes to swap our cows, which do not harm tortoise or the environment, for off roaders, who do far more damage than my cows ever could.

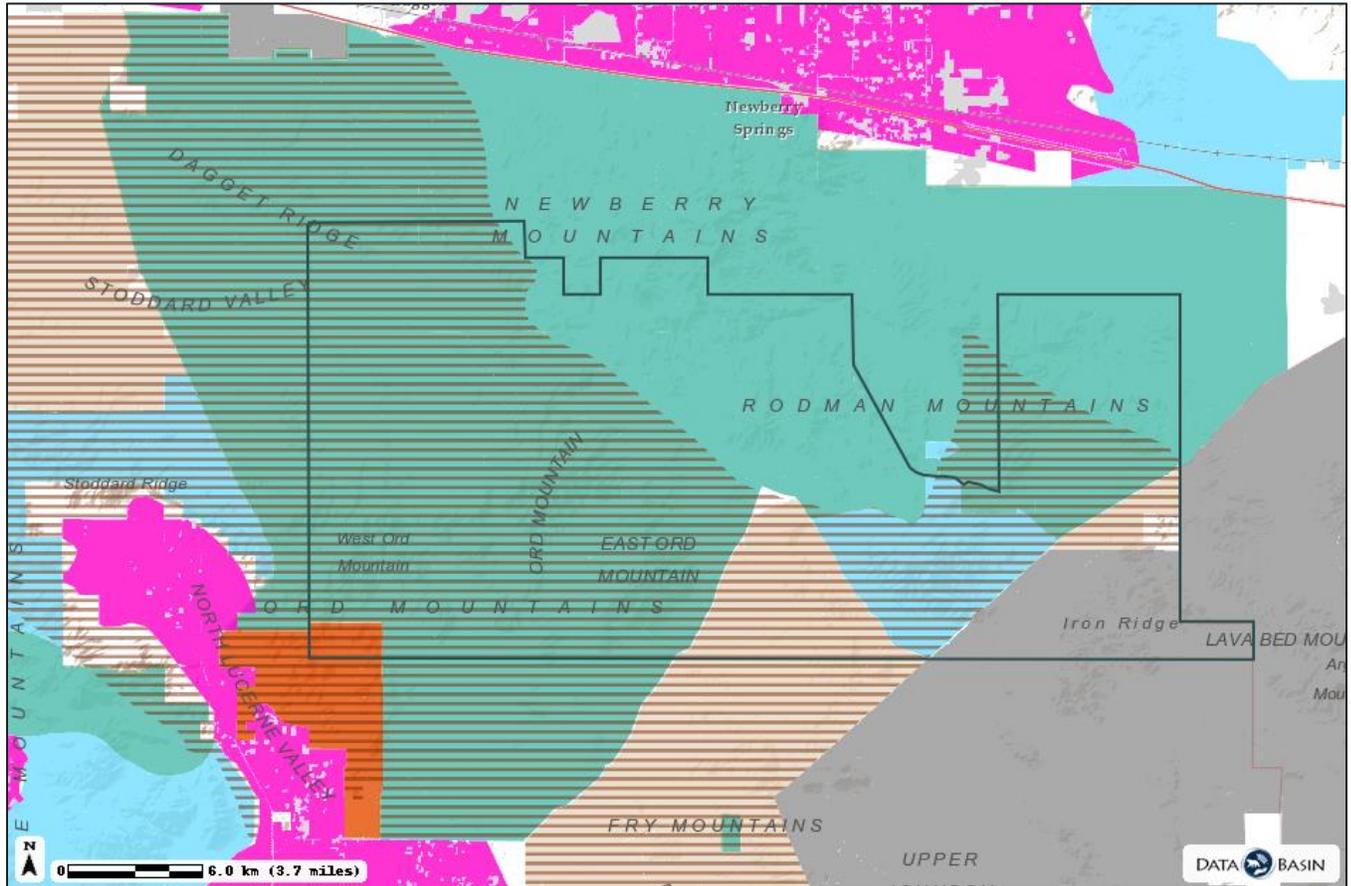
DRECP Proposed Land Use for DWMA

As far as I can understand, the DRECP's Preferred Alternative does the following:

1. Designates the DWMA as National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS), which does not appear to provide any more protections than are there now. As stated above, the area is already a DWMA and critical habitat unit.
2. Designates our Ranch as a priority for acquisition so the allotment is retired (which will end our management activities).
3. Opens the majority of the DWMA/NLCS designated areas to off-road vehicle use by putting a Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) designation on top of everything.
4. Designates a Future Assessment Area (FAA) over the southwestern corner of the allotment and then designates a Development Focus Area (DFA) right next to the western boundary of the DWMA.

In my mind, the DRECP can't do all these things that will negatively affect the land I spent the last 40 years ranching with my family — to the benefit of all species found here — and then tell me that it is my cattle and my way of life that need to go.

Ord Rodman DWMA – Preferred Alternative



- Development Focus Areas
- Proposed ACEC
- OHV Areas
- Military
- Future Assessment Areas
- DWMA
- Proposed SRMA
- Allotment

I have lived and worked on this land for over 40 years. I know how special it is and what it takes to keep it that way. I know how hard it is to manage trespass and vandalism. We are the ones doing the work on this land each and every year, maintaining springs and other water sources, fencing, and encouraging the public to use the land correctly. And now you want to take us off, to open it up to off-road vehicle use and put solar and wind development right up against the DWMA.

All of this makes no sense to me!

How is allowing off-road vehicle use of this area more protective of its resources than allowing cattle grazing?

What is the benefit of taking away the management we provide of this area? The DRECP is undoing all the values created and protected by our Ranch.

Where is the analysis to support changing and intensifying land uses in a DWMA?

Elimination of Grazing

The DRECP appears to be trying to make the case that most of the problems now facing the desert are due to grazing and the way to correct the problem is to totally eliminate this activity. In fact, it eliminates 16 grazing allotments in the planning area (Chapter III.16, page 5).

While the Ord Mountain Allotment is not identified to be terminated, it is a priority acquisition target (Appendix H, Table H-10). The DRECP seems to want to remove our grazing without any analysis as to what would happen if the allotment is terminated. It only makes the assumption that termination would be a good thing for the desert tortoise in the Ords. From being on this land for as long as I have, nothing I have seen or experienced on our Ranch supports this assumption.

Rather, this assumption is not reasonable for the current situation or for the future. It doesn't address the value of the habitat currently present or how future management will be provided. Who will manage this land when we're no longer present? The BLM isn't able to do it now, and I can't find anything in the document that indicates this fact is going to change. They're underfunded and understaffed. What's going to happen in the future when the climate changes that you're predicting will make the desert grassier and more fire prone? How are these grassy areas to be managed — through the use of herbicides? Are you going to send people out to pull weeds? Do you know how tough that will be to do? It seems short-sighted that the future use of cattle grazing as a management method is not being considered.

The DRECP also takes a blanket approach that all grazing is bad grazing. This simply isn't true. Part of the analysis that needs to be done for grazing by the DRECP should include how different livestock graze and how different grazing management programs work. Studies done for the desert seem to start off with a bias and don't take into account that cattle do not eat plants all the way down to the ground; they leave forage for desert tortoise and other species. While in most areas of the state, grazing is considered a working landscape and included in conservation strategies. The DRECP should also include in their grazing analysis the role grazing can play in land health. In many places, goats are used for naturally clearing land of invasive weeds (versus using toxic herbicides) prior to habitat restoration. My understanding is that this method is actually preferred by wildlife agencies.

Analysis of Grazing

Grazing has occurred in this desert for over 150 years. It has evolved from the wild west cattle barons portrayed in westerns into an important sector of our economy. Our ranches are run like a business. The health of our cattle depends on the health of our land.

Ranchers don't graze as they please; there are rules, regulations, and conditions we must adhere to. The DRECP acknowledges this. What is not discussed is that to be successful, ranchers must respect the land. Having overseen our operations for the last 40 years, I believe the high habitat values of the Ranch that are so highly prized by the wildlife agencies are due to grazing and our presence on the land.

I find it surprising that at this time when Americans are looking to local food sources, family farms and ranches, natural and organic beef, working landscapes, and sustaining local economies, the DRECP is blindly going backwards. The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has information on their website, www.nrdc.org, about how well-managed grazing operations generate environmental and economic benefits.

Since the creation of the Desert Protection Act, many allotments in the desert have been retired. Has it worked? Have all the unmanaged retired allotments solved the problem? Is the desert tortoise recovering? No. It hasn't. Instead the livestock industry within the County has been decimated and millions if not billions in revenue may have been lost to our local economy because more than cattle were lost. All the businesses and industries that were supported by our animals have been lost too and so are the dollars that all those businesses and their employees put back into our communities. All this is lost because it seems it's too difficult for regulatory agencies to take the enlightened approach and see that there are benefits to grazing. That it can be done right in the desert. We've been doing it right for 40 years to the entire desert's benefit.

I agree and recognize that conservation and protection of the desert is of paramount importance and I want to continue to support that effort. The ranchers shouldn't be the enemy here — we should be partners in landscape conservation. One industry shouldn't be sacrificed for the benefit of another — in this case ranching for renewable energy development.

DRECP and WEMO

To further complicate the public's review from what I can tell, the decision being made on grazing is being divided up between two plans, the DRECP and the yet to be released update of WEMO. It is impossible to know how my Ranch will be impacted, let alone provide my comments, without being able to review both plans. Frankly, it is upsetting to be attacked from all sides and then only be given partial information to respond to. I cannot believe that CEQA and NEPA even allow for such a thing to happen.

The BLM is required to consult with ranchers and apply the four C's (Carefully Considered, Consultation, Coordination, and Cooperation) when making any decisions in regards to plans that will affect our grazing operations. This consultation is required by NEPA and I do not think it's been applied by the DRECP.

The public comment period for the DRECP should remain open until the public has the opportunity to see and review the draft WEMO Plan and the BLM has consulted with the ranchers.

County Position Paper

Thankfully, San Bernardino County recognizes the importance of ranching per its February 3, 2015 “County of San Bernardino Position Paper on the Draft Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan.”

“The primary DRECP components that the County supports, assuming the italicized conditions are met, are as follows (page 2, bullet 3): *Conservation land as mitigation for renewable energy development on federal land, as long as conservation on federal land is prioritized first over conservation on private land, grazing allotment relinquishment is voluntary, and a mitigation bank for relinquished grazing allotments is developed such that unused allotments retain future use value.”*

I support the County’s position. But, based on my family’s experience in the Ords, ranchers should also be allowed to provide mitigation opportunities without relinquishing their allotments if they propose a grazing management plan that aids in maintaining ecosystem values.

In closing, my husband loved to ranch and be on this land. He saw the need to protect and manage the lands for the wildlife and native species long before the environmental movement became popular.

Our family is here now and we are committed, but — just like we valued conservation before it was the “in” thing to do — we are realizing that the model in the desert isn’t working — it’s time for a new model — we can’t keep repeating the same actions over and over again — we can’t just keep acquiring land when we can’t manage what we have — we can’t just keep saying BLM will do it when we know they won’t have the resources to do so.

We who live here, who work here — the people of this 22.5 million acre Plan Area — deserve something better, something that actually reflects who we are and where we live. And while the DRECP may have started with good intentions, right now it is just a giant stack of paper that changes nothing in a positive way. It will just end up being another

giant bureaucracy filled with a lot of old ideas that doesn't reflect the people or communities it's making decisions for. It is time to take a breather and get it right.

In closing, I make the following recommendations for grazing allotments:

- Grazing should not be eliminated from the Plan Area.
- BLM should work with ranchers to develop ranch management plans that continue grazing and land management for native species.
- The DRECP should create the real biological credit value for allotment lands. The higher the biological value of the lands, the more credits should be provided.
- The DRECP should not ignore existing legislation on the voluntary relinquishment of grazing allotments

Like my husband, I love this land and I want to continue to manage it for conservation and protect the Ord Rodman DWMA from intense OHV uses and renewable energy development that could destroy its natural resource values.

So that I can better understand what is going to happen to my family and our livelihood, I request that the next draft of the DRECP address all of my concerns in a thorough, clear, and concise manner. This may mean that some additional analysis needs to be completed.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments.

Sincerely,



Irene Fisher
Owner, Shield F Ranch

cc: Karen Douglas
Commissioner
California Energy Commission
1516 9th Street, MS-31
Sacramento, CA 95814

James Kenna
State Director
Bureau of Land Management
2800 Cottage Way, Suite W-1623
Sacramento, CA 95825

Ren Lohofener
Regional Director, Region 8
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
2800 Cottage Way
Sacramento, CA 95825

Charlton H. Bonham
Director
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
1416 Ninth Street
Sacramento, CA 95814