

Letter to LA Times March 12, 2019 by Pat Flanagan, in response to the Los Angeles Times Editorial Board Opinion piece on March 11, “Green power runs up against desert conservation in California.”

This Opinion repeats the oft-repeated DRECP ‘set-aside ONLY 388,000 acres - roughly 4% of 10.8 million acres of federal land, for commercial-scale renewable energy projects’. The ONLY is without context and implies that the desert is a large, flat billiard table sitting under the sun ready for play. In 2010 the USGS assessed the geology and geography of large footprint energy installations in the Mojave Desert in California and Nevada.

Solar installations require low-gradient smooth topography to work at peak performance. The Mojave Desert in California, while sunny, is wrinkled basin and range topography. The USGS analyzed 15,500 square miles of land for “low and smooth” from Lancaster CA to Jean NV. They analyzed for 3 slope categories - 0-1%, 1-3%, and 3-5%. Looking at the landforms, the unconsolidated sediments that lie beneath them, and the processes of deposition or erosion.

They found only 48% or 7,440 sq. mi. is less than 5% slope and a mere 618 sq. mi. is less than 1% slope, the favored slope category. Of the favored slope, 605 sq. mi. is susceptible to wind-blown dust and sand transport, especially after disturbance and, 538 sq. mi. is susceptible to flooding which can have a major impact on solar installations.

That leaves 67 square miles not susceptible to flooding but still susceptible to wind-blown dust. The dust, PM10 and PM2.5, are state and federal criteria pollutants and the Mojave Desert is not in compliance with their standards. Importantly, there are no state and federally approved dust monitors in the region to provide the baseline against which to measure the dust from solar projects over time. BLM owns 37% of the favored slope and 34% is privately owned. Air quality is a huge ‘parochial’ concern ANYWHERE. We fight to breathe.