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CALIFORNIA ENERGY COMMISSION

In the matter of:

Soda Mountain Solar Project)
) Docket No. 24-OPT-03
_____)

SODA MOUNTAIN SOLAR PROJECT
CEC STAFF ASSESSMENT PUBLIC MEETING

IN-PERSON AT:
HOLIDAY INN EXPRESS - CONFERENCE ROOM
2700 LENWOOD ROAD
BARSTOW, CA 92311

REMOTE ACCESS VIA ZOOM

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2026

1:00 P.M.

Reported by:

Elise Hicks

APPEARANCESCOMMISSIONERS

Noemi Gallardo, Lead Commissioner

David Hochschild, Chair

STAFF

Kaycee Chang, California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)
Project Management Unit Supervisor

Lisa Worrall, Project Manager

Eric Knight, Siting and Environmental Branch Manager

Mariah Ponce, Chief Counsel's Office

Crystal Cabrera, Chief Counsel's Office

Hilarie Anderson

PUBLIC ADVISOR'S OFFICE

Ryan Young, Deputy Public Advisor

APPLICANT

Hannah Arkin, Resolution Environmental

PRESENTER

Chris Huntley, Director of Biological Resources, Aspen
Environmental Group

PUBLIC COMMENT

Dan Munsey, San Bernardino County Fire Protection District

APPEARANCESPUBLIC COMMENT (cont'd)

Brandy Wood, California Department of Fish and Wildlife

Randy Banis, President of Friends of El Mirage

Scott Gibson, California Chapter of the Wild Sheep
Foundation

Debra Hughson

Neal Desai, Senior Pacific Regional Director, National
Parks Conservation Association

Mason Osgood

Chance Wilcox, National Parks Conservation Association

Pat Flanagan, Morongo Basin Conservation Association

Erin Gatlin

Arch McCulloch, Morongo Basin Conservation Association

Kevin Emmerich, Basin and Range Watch

Scott Miller, Western Power Trading Forum

Clinton Epps

Edward LaRue, Desert Tortoise Council

Ben Pratt, IBEW Local 477

Jason Becker, Operating Engineers Local 12

Christina Aiello, Wildlands Network

Scott Murtishaw, California Energy Storage Alliance

Donald Priest, California Chapter of the Wild Sheep
Foundation

APPEARANCESPUBLIC COMMENT (cont'd)

Joan Taylor, California/Nevada Desert Committee of Sierra Club

Laura Cunningham, on behalf of Moises Cisneros

Rhay Flores

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P R O C E E D I N G S

1:01 p.m.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2026

MS. CHANG: Thank you all for being here. We're going to get started. I am Kaycee Chang with the Siting, Transmission, and Environmental Protection Division, or as we like to say, STEP, and I supervise the STEP Division CEQA Project Managers. Thank you for attending today's CEC-hosted meeting on our Staff Assessment of the Soda Mountain Solar Project.

Commissioner Gallardo will now lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Next slide, please.

COMMISSIONER GALLARDO: Please rise.

(The Pledge of Allegiance is recited in unison.)

COMMISSIONER GALLARDO: Thank you.

MS. CHANG: Thank you. We would like to go over a few meeting logistics.

This meeting is hybrid with attendees in-person at the Holiday Inn Express, and virtual attendees on Zoom. We also thank our Spanish interpreters and court reporter for this assistance here today.

For those attending virtually, Zoom closed captioning has been enabled. Attendees can use the service by clicking on the Live Transcript icon and then choosing

1 either Show Subtitle or View Full Transcript. The closed
2 captioning service can be stopped by exiting out of the
3 Live Transcript or selecting the Hide Subtitle icon.

4 We also have enabled Spanish interpretation on
5 Zoom. And for those participating in-person, please be
6 mindful of speaking slowly and clearly into the microphone
7 for those participating online to hear, for our Spanish
8 interpreters, and the court reporter.

9 Finally, this meeting is being recorded. The
10 meeting recording will be available on the California
11 Energy Commission's website.

12 Next slide, please.

13 This slide provides an overview of today's
14 agenda. We will be sharing information with the public and
15 presenting on our project findings, which are detailed in
16 the Staff Assessment. There will be plenty of
17 opportunities for comments from California Native American
18 tribes, government agencies, elected officials, and
19 interested parties and members of the public. We also have
20 agendas with the Public Advisors table to the right.

21 Next slide, please.

22 We are fortunate to have with us today our Siting
23 Lead Commissioner, Noemi Gallardo, who you will hear from
24 shortly. At the tables, we have our CEC Staff Attorneys,
25 Mariah Ponce and Crystal Cabrera. We are also fortunate to

1 have CEC's Acting Public Advisor, Ryan Young.

2 Now, I would like to hand the microphone over to
3 our CEC Executive Director, Drew Bohan.

4 MR. BOHAN: Apologies. I just want to say thank
5 you everybody for coming out and for your participation. I
6 want to give particular thanks to Neal Desai and a few
7 others who brought us out for a tour of the site. We also
8 got a tour from the developer. And I want to thank staff.
9 You write a thousand-page report, you don't make everybody
10 happy all the time, but I thought they did a terrific job
11 on pulling this together. And every project we have has
12 issues and we try to work through those the best we can,
13 and I felt like we did that here. So I just want to say
14 thank you. I'm looking forward to public comment.

15 COMMISSIONER GALLARDO: All right. Thank you,
16 Drew.

17 Buenas tardes. Good afternoon everyone and Happy
18 New Year as well. My name is Noemi Gallardo and I'm one of
19 the five Commissioners at the California Energy Commission.
20 I'm also the Lead Commissioner for the Commission's
21 permitting work, including the Opt-In Certification
22 Program, which is what we're in today.

23 It is great to be back here in Barstow to discuss
24 the Soda Mountain Solar Project application. We had a
25 public meeting back in August of last year where we heard

1 from many of you. And that meeting was very constructive
2 and helped inform the Staff Assessment being presented
3 today. So we did learn about your concerns regarding the
4 potential impacts on the landscape, the potential impacts
5 on several animal species, including the desert tortoise,
6 the Desert bighorn sheep. And today you're going to hear
7 directly from staff about how they evaluated those issues
8 and others.

9 And we, as Drew mentioned, we realized that there
10 will be mixed reactions to the Staff's Assessment and their
11 recommendation. And we're here today to inform you more
12 about that and also to continue listening to all of you.
13 We want to know any further insight, questions, concerns,
14 general comments that you may have. And our staff
15 meticulously conducts an independent review and analysis of
16 each application. As you may have noticed, for those of
17 you that took a look at it, it's over 1,000 pages. And it
18 took many hours to get there, so I wanted to thank the
19 staff for their diligence and the rigor that they applied
20 to all of these proceedings, including this one on Soda
21 Mountain.

22 I also want to thank the support offices for
23 their collaboration throughout this process. The Chief
24 Counsel's Office that provide legal expertise, our Public
25 Advisor and his team that provide support to the public,

1 our Media Team, and also our Executive Director Drew.

2 I also want to emphasize to all of you that the
3 Chair and I have said on previous occasions, and we're
4 repeating it today, that we will not vote to approve any
5 project that we would not feel comfortable having in our
6 neighborhoods or in our communities. And so that's why
7 we're here, the Chair is joining via Zoom, I'm here in-
8 person, to continue listening again to your insights,
9 comments, questions, et cetera. That all is very important
10 to us.

11 And before I pass the mic to the Chair, I'd also
12 like to express some gratitude to our applicant, VC
13 Renewables and their team, for the professionalism that
14 they have shown and the diligence also in providing the
15 staff the various information that they need to be able to
16 do their evaluation.

17 I, too, want to thank Neal Desai for coordinating
18 that site visit for the Energy Commission to help us better
19 understand the impact of decisions made here on the bighorn
20 sheep in particular.

21 We also appreciate Scott Gibson, Dr. Aiello,
22 Jacob Overton [sic] and Chancellor Cox (phonetic) for
23 joining us on that visit, so appreciate that.

24 Finally, on behalf of the Energy Commission, I
25 want to thank the community of Barstow and San Bernardino

1 County in general for welcoming us and also for
2 participating in this proceeding, whether that's in the
3 room or via Zoom. On that note, I want to let you all know
4 that we have about 55 people on Zoom as well. So we have
5 folks in the room and folks on Zoom.

6 So, Chair Hochschild, I'll pass the mic on to
7 you. And after him will be our Public Advisor Ryan Young.

8 Gracias. Thank you.

9 CHAIR HOCHSCHILD: Thank you so much,
10 Commissioner.

11 Hey, good afternoon, everyone. I just wanted to
12 give my thanks to all the stakeholders for joining. Very
13 much looking forward to hearing all the comments and to
14 working with all of you. And especially want to give my
15 gratitude to the Energy Commission staff for all the
16 diligence and to the applicant.

17 And with that, back to you, Commissioner.

18 MS. CHANG: Thank you, Chair, for joining us.
19 We'll pass it on to our Public Advisor, Ryan Young.

20 MR. YOUNG: Good afternoon. Thank you for
21 joining us today. I'm Ryan Briscoe Young, the acting
22 Public Advisor with the Energy Commission's Office of the
23 Public Advisor, Energy Equity, and Tribal Affairs.

24 Today, we're going to have some presentations,
25 hear from government representatives, and then have our

1 main public comment period. I just wanted to mention at
2 the beginning of our time together a couple of instructions
3 for later in the day, which I'll also repeat then as well.

4 The first is, is that we ask everyone who would
5 like to make a comment to please turn in a blue card as
6 soon as possible to the Public Advisor's desk over there on
7 your right. If you represent a local government entity,
8 state entity, or California Native American tribe, please
9 indicate that on your blue card as well.

10 I'll now pass the mic to Lisa Worrall.

11 MS. WORRALL: Thanks so much, Ryan. Sorry. Can
12 you hear me out there? Okay. Excellent. Thank you, Ryan.

13 My name is Lisa Worrall. I'm the Project Manager
14 for the CEC for the Soda Mountain Solar Project. The
15 application -- oh, sorry. The goal of today's CEC's
16 meeting is to present Staff's Assessment, which includes a
17 draft environmental impact report of the Soda Mountain
18 Solar Project, to encourage public participation, hear
19 comments from you, and, too, feedback to our updated
20 environmental document, the Updated Staff Assessment.

21 The comment period closes on February 27th at
22 5:00 p.m., so any comments you have regarding the
23 environmental document, please submit those to the docket
24 or today verbally. I'll touch more on that about how to
25 participate on the docket later in today's meeting.

1 Next slide, please.

2 The application for Soda Mountain Solar Project
3 was submitted to the CEC under the Opt-In Certification
4 Program. The project proposes a solar photovoltaic, or PV,
5 facility with a battery energy storage system, or BESS,
6 B-E-S-S, on approximately 2,670 acres of land administered
7 by the United States Department of the Interior Bureau of
8 Land Management, also known as BLM.

9 The project site is located approximately 7 miles
10 southwest of the community of Baker in unincorporated San
11 Bernardino County. The project site is bounded directly to
12 the east by the Mojave National Preserve and BLM lands,
13 including the Razor Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area at
14 the southeast corner. Interstate 15, or I-15, and the
15 former Arrowhead Trail Highway run along the western
16 boundary of the project site. The Razor Road Shell --
17 Razor Road Services Shell Oil Gas Station is located off I-
18 15 southwest of the project site along the access road,
19 which is Razor Road. This is where the primary access to
20 the project site would be obtained through.

21 The project would disturb approximately 2,059
22 acres overall and include a 300 megawatt solar PV facility,
23 a 300 megawatt, or 1,200 megawatt BESS -- megawatt hour
24 BESS, 140,000 square foot high voltage project substation,
25 500 kilovolt generation intertie line, or gen-tie, a

1 234,300 square foot utility switch yard, and a 500 kilovolt
2 transmission loop-in lines.

3 The power produced by the project would be
4 conveyed to the regional electrical grid through an
5 interconnection with the existing 500 kilovolt Marketplace-
6 Adelanto transmission segment of the Greater Mead-Adelanto
7 500 kV transmission line. This line is owned and operated
8 by the Los Angeles Department of Water Power, also known as
9 LADWP. LADWP would also need to make protection-setting
10 upgrades at the Marketplace Substation in Boulder City in
11 Nevada and Adelanto Substation in Adelanto, California, to
12 accommodate the power generated by the Soda Mountain Solar
13 Project.

14 Next slide, please.

15 The CEC received the project application on
16 August 1st, 2024. The CEC reviewed the data submitted and
17 completed a series of data requests for information before
18 deeming the project complete -- or the application complete
19 in July of 2025. CEC staff then held a public
20 informational and environmental scoping meeting in Barstow
21 in August 2025 in this very room. The CEC Staff Assessment
22 was filed December 29th, 2025, opening the 60-day public
23 comment period, which as I said before, closes February 27,
24 2026.

25 Today, we'll be sharing you our Staff Assessment

1 conclusions and hearing comments from agencies,
2 governments, California Native American tribes and
3 interested members of the public. No decisions will be
4 made at this meeting.

5 The CEC will publish an Updated Staff Assessment
6 which will include final recommendations on the proposed
7 project, and this will be published no later than March
8 27th, 2026. This project and the CEC staff recommendation
9 will be presented at a business meeting to be held on April
10 27th, 2026, for a formal decision by the CEC. And this
11 business meeting will be formally noticed.

12 Next slide, please.

13 To date, the CEC has received comments from 17
14 people and interested members of the public on the proposed
15 project. Thank you for those comments. Many comments have
16 raised concerns related to impacts to biological species,
17 particularly Desert bighorn sheep, desert tortoise,
18 burrowing owl, Mojave fringe-toed lizard, and their
19 habitats.

20 Also of concern is the proximity of the project
21 to the future overpass and the Mojave National Preserve.
22 Other concerns raised include concerns regarding air
23 quality, fugitive dust, greenhouse gas emissions, visual
24 resources, BESS fire safety and impacts on hydrological
25 resources. Greenhouse gas emissions are also of concern.

1 We continue to consider public comments during
2 this process and will reply to all comments raising
3 significant environmental issues and make edits to the
4 analysis, if necessary, in the Updated Staff Assessment
5 which will include the final environmental impact report.

6 Next slide, please. Thank you.

7 The Staff Assessment has been prepared by a team
8 of CEC technical experts including biologists, mechanical
9 engineers, air resource engineers, archaeologists,
10 geologists and more. Staff evaluated the potential
11 environmental effects of the construction and operation of
12 the project in compliance with the California Environmental
13 Quality Act, also known as CEQA, CEQA guidelines, the
14 Warren-Alquist Act, and the California Code of Regulations
15 Title 20.

16 The topic areas shown on this slide are not those
17 that are considered in a typical EIR. These engineering
18 topics are required to be analyzed per requirements of the
19 Warren-Alquist Act and in implementing regulations in
20 California Code of Regulations Title 20. We evaluated
21 engineering aspects of the project and concluded that the
22 construction and operation of the project would be
23 consistent with all applicable local, state and federal
24 plans, policies and regulations. Should the project be
25 certified it can be reliably operated.

1 For further specific details we encourage you to
2 download the Staff Assessment from the project's docket.
3 Part of our presentation here describes how to find project
4 documents on the CEC website, and that will be later on
5 this afternoon.

6 Next slide, please.

7 This table summarizes staff's CEQA impact
8 conclusions for the environmental topic areas and the
9 project's consistency with plans, policies and regulations
10 in these areas.

11 The CEC staff has identified significant and
12 unavoidable impacts in the areas of biological resources
13 and visual resources. These are the rows bolded in the
14 table. Red means the project is not consistent with plans,
15 policies and regulations, and that there are significant
16 and unavoidable impacts.

17 Next slide, please.

18 I will now begin our staff presentations on the
19 environmental areas of concern. I'll pass the mic over to
20 Chris Huntley our biologist.

21 Thank you.

22 MR. HUNTLEY: Good afternoon. My name is Chris
23 Huntley. I'm the Director of Biological Resources and a
24 senior wildlife biologist at Aspen Environmental Group, and
25 we are a consultant to the CEC on this project.

1 Today, I'll provide a brief overview of the
2 baseline conditions that occur on the project site and the
3 environmental considerations taken into account during our
4 analysis of the impacts to special status plants, wildlife,
5 aquatic resources, our proposed mitigation measures, which
6 are also known as conditions of certification, and how the
7 project aligns with permitting requirements.

8 Please note that in the biological resources
9 Staff Assessment, the figures were inadvertently omitted
10 from the published document. These figures have been filed
11 to the docket in an errata to the Staff Assessment and are
12 available online.

13 Next slide, please.

14 The proposed project is located on public lands
15 managed by the BLM. The habitat is largely characterized
16 as creosote bush scrub which is a common plant community
17 found across most of the Mojave Desert. In addition, there
18 are small areas that support more unique vegetation
19 dominated by rigid spineflower and joint fir which are
20 considered rare plant communities.

21 The southern portion of the project site is
22 crossed by Razor Road, a well known off-highway vehicle
23 trail. Another dirt road bisects the area and runs north
24 from Razor Road. These roads support periodic camping and
25 vehicle travel that we saw when we were on the project

1 site.

2 The project site also supports an extensive
3 network of ephemeral drainages that carry storm flows from
4 the Soda Mountains across the site. Some of these
5 drainages carry flow under Interstate 15 through a series
6 of ditches and culverts.

7 There is no designated critical habitat
8 identified by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service
9 in the project area. However, the project gen-tie line
10 would connect to the existing LADWP transmission line
11 right-of-way which is located in a BLM designated area of
12 critical environmental concern. These are also known as
13 ACECs.

14 The project is located immediately adjacent to
15 the south Soda Mountains. This area supports the Soda
16 Mountain herd of Desert bighorn sheep and the area has been
17 deemed essential to the long-term recovery of this herd.
18 The project is also located just south of a proposed
19 wildlife crossing that would span Interstate 15 and provide
20 sheep and other desert wildlife access to historic habitat
21 on the other side of the interstate. This crossing is
22 being constructed as part of the High-Speed Rail project to
23 enhance wildlife movement in this area.

24 Next slide, please.

25 This slide shows the projects -- or the proposed

1 project footprint, which is outlined in black. The colored
2 areas represent seasonal bighorn sheep movement. The data
3 comes from collared bighorn sheep that have been tagged in
4 the project area.

5 It is evident when you look at this figure the
6 amount of sheep usage -- the sheep use the south Soda
7 Mountains extensively. And under CEQA, potential impacts
8 on wildlife movement corridors, which are areas used by
9 animals to move from one area to another, must be evaluated
10 as part of the impact assessment for biological resources.
11 And the project site is located in and adjacent to an
12 important movement corridor for this species. And this
13 herd of Desert bighorn sheep relies on the south Soda
14 Mountains to support breeding, foraging, and as escape
15 habitat.

16 Next slide, please.

17 To date, no federal -- no state or federally
18 listed plants have been detected during multiple years of
19 surveys and are not expected to occur. However, the area
20 is expected to support a variety of native animals,
21 including at least one watch list species that, while it is
22 not typically afforded protection under CEQA, it has been
23 evaluated in the Staff Assessment.

24 The project site does support a low-density
25 population of desert tortoise, which is a state endangered

1 and federally-threatened species. And the project owner
2 would be required to capture and translocate these animals
3 to adjacent habitat. It would also be required to provide
4 compensatory mitigation in the form of land preservation to
5 reduce impacts to this and other species should the project
6 be approved.

7 Other sensitive species that are known to occur
8 either on or adjacent to the project site include western
9 burrowing owl, a state candidate for listing, Desert
10 bighorn sheep, which are considered a state fully protected
11 species, desert kit fox, which is an animal protected from
12 harm by various state regulations, and Mojave fringe-toed
13 lizards and American badgers, which are considered state
14 species of special concern.

15 There are also a number of common and sensitive
16 birds known from the region that have been either observed
17 or have the potential to occur on the project site. Some
18 of these include loggerhead shrike, Bendire's, Le Conte's,
19 and crissal thrashers, a number of raptors, golden eagle,
20 and various species of migratory waterfowl that fly over
21 the site.

22 Next slide, please.

23 As presented in the previous slides, our
24 biological resource evaluation included reviewing the
25 applicant's information, conducting independent research

1 and literature reviews to assess the occurrence of
2 sensitive species, collaborating with other regulatory
3 agencies including the BLM, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife
4 Service, and the California Department of Fish and
5 Wildlife. And we also participated in three one-day site
6 visits to ground truth the existing data and to meet with
7 concerned parties to the proceedings.

8 The result is the development and recommendation
9 of 26 mitigation measures, including 11 species-specific
10 measures, which again are also referred to as conditions of
11 certification. These measures include, but are not limited
12 to, pre-construction surveys, construction monitoring, the
13 implementation of non-disturbance buffers, the
14 translocation of desert tortoise, and post-construction
15 monitoring. These measures will be implemented by the
16 project owner, the CEC staff oversight throughout the life
17 of the project should the proposed project be approved by
18 the CEC.

19 Pursuant to state law, if the CEC issues a
20 license for this project, the conditions of certification
21 include incidental take authorization for desert tortoise
22 and western burrowing owl under the California Endangered
23 Species Act, also known as CESA. Under CESA, take means to
24 hunt, pursue, capture, kill, or harm a protected species or
25 attempt to do so, even if it occurs unintentionally during

1 construction or operation.

2 Take authorization in this case, under CEC's in-
3 lieu permitting authority, would allow impacts to occur to
4 state-listed species during lawful project activities and
5 would require a variety of avoidance measures and other
6 mitigation requirements to ensure impacts are fully
7 mitigated. And staff collaborated with representatives of
8 the California Department of Fish and Wildlife in the
9 development of these measures.

10 Our analysis presented two distinct types of
11 impacts, first during construction, and then during the
12 operations of the facility over the life of the project.
13 Except for Desert bighorn sheep, we concluded that impacts
14 to sensitive plants and wildlife from the construction of
15 the proposed project could be reduced to less than
16 significant levels with the implementation of staff's
17 proposed conditions of certification. It would also comply
18 with state and federal Endangered Species Acts and other
19 plans, policies, and regulations.

20 However, staff concluded there would be
21 significant and unavoidable impacts to Desert bighorn sheep
22 and their migratory movement from the construction and
23 operation of the proposed project, as the project footprint
24 would intrude onto important habitat that has been deemed
25 essential to the viability of the Soda Mountain herd. The

1 project also would not be consistent with the California
2 Fish and Game Code standard requirement to fully mitigate
3 impacts to a fully protected species.

4 Next slide, please.

5 The Staff Assessment identifies the full list of
6 plans, policies, and regulations impacted by the proposed
7 project. As discussed in the Staff Assessment, during
8 construction, the proposed project would be consistent with
9 applicable plans, policies, and regulations for biological
10 resources, except those protecting Desert bighorn sheep.
11 During operation of the project, the project would not be
12 consistent with the California Fish and Game Code standard
13 requirement to fully mitigate impacts as it relates to
14 Desert bighorn sheep. Detailed information and analysis
15 can be found in the Staff Assessment on this topic.

16 However, staff determined that impacts to Desert
17 bighorn sheep could be reduced to less than significant
18 levels with the adoption of the bighorn sheep buffer and
19 BESS relocation Alternatives 1 and 2. These alternatives
20 include a 0.25 mile buffer from the 10 percent slope line,
21 and this buffer was developed in coordination with staff
22 from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The
23 figure to the left shows the bighorn sheep buffer and the
24 BESS Relocation for Alternative 2, which, as you will hear
25 later today, is staff's environmentally superior

1 alternative. And this figure shows the 0.25 mile buffer
2 applied to the proposed project.

3 And this concludes the presentation on biological
4 resources, and I will pass the mic over to Eric Knight.

5 Thank you.

6 MR. KNIGHT: Thank you, Chris.

7 Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Eric
8 Knight. I manage the Siting and Environmental Branch of
9 the CEC's Siting Division, STEP Division as we've been
10 referring to it. I supervised the preparation of the
11 visual resources section of the Staff Assessment.

12 As discussed and explained in the Staff
13 Assessment, the proposed project would have significant
14 environmental effects under two visual resources questions
15 in CEQA Guidelines Appendix G and would be inconsistent
16 with identified federal and local plans, policies, and
17 regulations pertaining to aesthetics and visual resources.

18 Next slide, please.

19 There are four questions under aesthetics,
20 otherwise known as visual resources, in the CEQA Guidelines
21 Appendix G. This is known as the environmental checklist.
22 For the first two questions, would the project have a
23 substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista, and would the
24 project damage scenic resources, staff concluded that
25 impacts would be less than significant and no impact,

1 respectively.

2 The project is not within a formally designated
3 scenic vista. While informal scenic vistas could be
4 available for the Soda Mountain Wilderness and Mojave
5 National Preserve, much of the views of the project from
6 these locations would be substantially screened by
7 intervening terrain.

8 An alignment of the Old Spanish National Historic
9 Trail is located to the east and south of the project.
10 However, there are no high-value sites or segments
11 identified along this portion of the trail. At its closest
12 point, the Old Spanish Trail is approximately 3.4 miles
13 from the project, and no visibility along the trail was
14 identified in the viewshed analysis.

15 The project is not within the view corridor of
16 any officially designated state scenic highway. Although
17 I-15 is identified by Caltrans as an eligible state scenic
18 highway, it must first be nominated for designation by San
19 Bernardino County, which the county has not done. The
20 nearest state scenic highway to the project is Interstate
21 40, approximately 25 miles to the south. Staff's review of
22 the San Bernardino County's plans and ordinances did not
23 identify any designated or protected scenic resources on
24 the site or in the vicinity.

25 Next slide, please.

1 The third question under aesthetics asks, would
2 the project in non-urbanized areas substantially degrade
3 the existing visual character or quality of public views of
4 the site and its surroundings? For the Soda Mountain
5 project, staff used an adapted descriptive inventory model,
6 formal aesthetic -- or methodology, excuse me, formal
7 aesthetic model to evaluate the physical change the project
8 would have on the existing visual character or quality of
9 the site and the surrounding area. The evaluation focused
10 on project prominence and visual absorption capability.
11 Project prominence measures the degree of visual contrast
12 with the existing landscape and visual absorption
13 capability measures the ability of the landscape to absorb
14 the visual contrast without an alteration to its visual
15 character.

16 The physical change to visual character quality
17 was evaluated from 11 key observation points, or KOPs. A
18 KOP is a point in a publicly-accessible location where the
19 public -- where a public view of the project is analyzed
20 and evaluated in the landscape. For each KOP, the
21 applicant provided photographs showing the existing view
22 and photorealistic simulations of how the proposed project
23 components would appear from each KOP. On the next slide
24 I'll show before and after images from one of these KOPs.

25 A KOP evaluation is conducted for all 11 KOPs

1 determined given the existing physical environment, that
2 the color, form, texture, and scale of the project
3 components cannot be camouflaged, disguised, screened, or
4 exterior surface coated, colored, or finished, nor can
5 setbacks be employed that would mitigate the degradation of
6 the existing visual character quality of public views of
7 the site and its surroundings to less than significant
8 levels.

9 Generally speaking, the undeveloped valley floor
10 would be substantially modified as the project would
11 introduce forms, lines, colors, and textures associated
12 with the PV arrays and associated infrastructure that are
13 uncommon and not currently found in the existing landscape.
14 The existing rural open space would be replaced with an
15 inherent semi-industrial utilitarian landscape character.
16 After mitigation, the visual impacts remain significant and
17 unavoidable.

18 Next slide, please.

19 This slide shows images from Figures 5.15-5a and
20 5.15-5b in a Staff Assessment. The image on the left is
21 how the project site currently looks to travelers on
22 northbound Interstate 15 looking east towards the site.
23 The image on the right is the proposed project simulated in
24 that same view. The nearest project facilities to KOP 2
25 would be approximately 0.1 mile, or approximately 528 feet

1 to the east.

2 Next slide, please.

3 The fourth and final aesthetics question in CEQA
4 guidelines asks, would the project create a new source of
5 substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day
6 or nighttime views in the area? The approximately 2,670
7 acre project site consists of a broadly enclosed,
8 undeveloped desert valley. Generally, the project site is
9 visually and ecologically characteristic of the conditions
10 common in the region. With existing nighttime lighting
11 conditions -- while existing nighttime lighting conditions
12 vary throughout the area, no light sources currently exist
13 on this project site and there is no emission of artificial
14 light at night and no reflectance during daylight.

15 The World Atlas Night Sky Brightness Interactive
16 Map shows the location of the project site in a minimal
17 brightness area. The map delineates physical radiance, or
18 brightness, homogeneously over an area from an approximate
19 site location by color. The next slide will show this map
20 of the project site.

21 Given the current absence of night lighting and
22 structures on the proposed project site, implementation of
23 the project has the potential to cause the emission of
24 artificial light into the nighttime environment from
25 outdoor lighting for site and building access and security

1 purposes, and glare and reflectance during daytime from the
2 surface of PV panels and other structures.

3 However, staff concludes that levels of new light
4 and glare and reflectance emitted by the project and from
5 construction laydown areas would have a less than
6 significant effect on the environment with effective
7 implementation of staff's proposed conditions of
8 certification that would include VIS-2 for design and
9 structural surface treatments, VIS- 4, landscape screening,
10 VIS-5, night lighting management, and VIS-6, glint and
11 glare mitigation and monitoring for PV panels. Mitigation
12 measures VIS-1, design and structural surface treatments,
13 and VIS-3, night lighting management for the LADWP owned
14 and operated switchyard.

15 Next slide, please.

16 This is the slide from the World Atlas night sky
17 brightness map. It shows the brightness at night emitted
18 from the general project area along Interstate 15 corridor
19 and eastern San Bernardino County, California. Night sky
20 brightness for the site and surrounding area is rated C2,
21 typically truly dark site, and C3, rural sky.

22 Next slide, please.

23 The BLM's Land Use Plan amendment for the Desert
24 Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, or DRECP, established
25 visual resources management classifications for lands under

1 BLM's management that allow authorized activities or land
2 uses to contrast with the visual environment to varying
3 degrees. The project site and surrounding areas is
4 categorized as visual resource management Class III, which
5 requires that activities and uses partially retain the
6 existing character of the landscape. Under this
7 classification, activities or uses may attract attention
8 but should not dominate the view of the casual observer.
9 The proposed project would not be consistent with the DRECP
10 and that would create strong degrees of visual contrast
11 when viewed from all 11 of the representative KOPs.

12 The DRECP also requires regional mitigation for
13 mitigation -- or for visual impacts in general public
14 lands. Although project visual impacts will remain
15 significant following implementation of staff's proposed
16 conditions of certification and mitigation measures, no
17 additional mitigation or compensation has been identified
18 to offset these significant and unavoidable impacts.
19 Therefore, the project would not be consistent with this
20 DRECP policy.

21 The Staff Assessment also identified that the
22 project's residual significant visual impacts pertaining to
23 the degradation of existing visual character or quality of
24 public views would be inconsistent with several policies
25 and requirements in the San Bernardino County Countywide

1 Plan, including the Land Use, Natural Resources, and
2 Renewable Energy Conservation Elements, and the San
3 Bernardino County Development Code.

4 Let's see. This concludes the presentation on
5 the visual resources and I will now pass the presentation
6 back to Project Manager Lisa Worrall.

7 MS. WORRALL: Thanks so much, Eric, for that.

8 I will now provide an overview of the
9 alternatives analysis that was conducted pursuant to CEQA.

10 Next slide, please.

11 The alternatives analysis is a core component of
12 CEQA and is intended to inform decision makers by the CEC
13 and provide transparency for the project -- or for the
14 public. CEQA requires inclusion of a no-project
15 alternative which serves as a baseline for comparing
16 environmental effects and identification of the
17 environmentally superior alternative among the action
18 alternatives considered.

19 CEQA requires lead agencies to evaluate a range
20 of reasonable alternatives to a proposed project that could
21 feasibly obtain most of the basic project objectives while
22 avoiding or substantially reducing significant
23 environmental impacts. For this project, the basic project
24 objectives, as described in the Staff Assessment, also
25 include renewable energy generation, grid reliability, and

1 energy storage.

2 Consistent with CEQA's rule of reason to evaluate
3 alternatives necessary to permit a reasoned choice,
4 alternatives shall be limited to ones that would avoid or
5 substantially lessen any of the significant effects of the
6 project.

7 In determining whether an alternative is
8 reasonable, CEQA considers whether it is technically
9 feasible, economically viable, consistent with applicable
10 regulatory requirements, supported by available
11 infrastructure, and whether the project proponent could
12 reasonably acquire or control the site. This screening
13 process ensures the alternatives analysis remains focused
14 on realistic implementable options that meaningfully inform
15 the CEC's decision. As required by CEQA, staff have
16 identified an environmentally superior alternative.

17 Next slide, please.

18 As described in the Staff Assessment, the
19 proposed project would result in significant and avoidable
20 impacts, including impacts to Desert bighorn sheep habitat
21 and their movement, and visual resources, as well as public
22 safety concerns related to the proximity of the BESS to I-
23 15. Additional impacts were identified in other resource
24 areas, including air quality and water resources. These
25 impacts were central considerations in shaping the

1 alternatives analysis and directly guided by the
2 development of the two bighorn sheep buffer and relocated
3 BESS alternatives.

4 The proposed alternatives were specifically
5 designed to address these issues by reducing the project
6 footprint, increasing separation from sensitive biological
7 resources and I-15, and improving public safety concerns
8 while continuing to meet the project's renewable energy
9 generation and energy storage objectives.

10 Next slide, please.

11 The alternatives analysis summarizes the
12 alternatives that were considered but eliminated from
13 further study because they would not meet most of the basic
14 project objectives or were determined to be infeasible.
15 Alternative site locations were reviewed but dismissed due
16 to the absence of suitable land near necessary electrical
17 infrastructure, challenging terrain, and a lack of
18 sufficiently large contiguous parcels along the Adelanto-
19 Mead transmission corridor.

20 Three alternatives were considered for full
21 analysis, specifically the no-project alternative, the BHS
22 buffer, or bighorn sheep buffer, and relocated BESS
23 Alternative 1, and bighorn sheep buffer and relocated BESS
24 Alternative 2.

25 Under the no-project alternative, the proposed

1 project would not be constructed. All project-related
2 environmental impacts would be avoided, and as a result,
3 the site would remain in existing undeveloped conditions.

4 The BHS buffer and relocated BESS Alternatives 1
5 and 2 were developed by staff to directly address impacts
6 to desert bighorn sheep and concerns about public safety
7 while maintaining the project's renewable energy generation
8 and energy storage objectives. These alternatives would
9 reduce impacts to biological resources and, specifically,
10 desert bighorn sheep. However, impacts to visual resources
11 would remain significant and unavoidable.

12 Due to added ground disturbance and the
13 additional gen-tie length required to connect the BESS
14 facility to the proposed on-site substation as required for
15 the BHS buffer Alternative 1, the BHS buffer and
16 Alternative 2 was identified as the environmentally
17 superior alternative.

18 Next slide.

19 The BHS buffer and relocated BESS Alternative 2
20 establishes a quarter-mile buffer downslope from the 10
21 percent slope contour that defines the lower extent of
22 important BHS foraging and escape habitat along the site's
23 northern, southern, eastern -- sorry, southern, and eastern
24 boundary, as recommended by California Department of Fish
25 and Wildlife.

1 This figure shows the site plan for this
2 alternative. The purple crosshatch area shows the quarter-
3 mile BHS buffer, and the three green rectangular area shows
4 the proposed location of the BESS facility. This
5 topographic line marks where the land transitions from flat
6 alluvial fan to the steeper foothill slopes that serve as
7 foraging escape terrain for the bighorn sheep. Maintaining
8 a setback from this 10 percent slope threshold would reduce
9 potential disturbance, lighting, and noise effects in areas
10 used by sheep between the valley floor and the adjacent
11 mountainous terrain.

12 These design modifications reduce the potential
13 disturbance by reducing the project's footprint and
14 limiting the intrusion into the sensitive wildlife areas
15 essential to the Soda Mountain bighorn sheep herd while
16 increasing separation from a major transportation corridor.

17 Next slide, please.

18 This alternative relocates the BESS to an
19 interior portion of the solar field, avoiding the area
20 immediately adjacent to I-15 and increasing the distance
21 between the BESS and I-15 to approximately 970 feet. This
22 resulting setback reduces the likelihood that drivers would
23 be exposed to smoke, reduced visibility, or chemical
24 inhalation hazards in the unlikely event that a BESS
25 thermal runaway incident occurs. This additional spacing

1 also reduces the potential for visual distraction for
2 motorists and contributes to improve public safety.

3 The BESS is shifted directly east which would
4 require a short extension of the gen-tie line to the point
5 of interconnection at the substation because the substation
6 will actually be relocated adjacent to the BESS facility,
7 so it would need a longer connection. However, it will be
8 shorter than under the Alternative 1.

9 Some reorganization of the PV panel placement
10 would be required to avoid encroaching into this quarter
11 mile buffer, the bighorn sheep buffer. Approximately 50
12 acres of the PV arrays that are located too close to the
13 slope threshold would be shifted to the interior areas of
14 the site that fall outside of the buffer. And to maintain
15 the project's generating capacity, the applicant may
16 redistribute relocated panels within the southern or
17 central portions of the project site, adjust row spacing or
18 employ higher efficiency modules at the time of
19 construction. These adjustments would occur within the
20 approved project footprint and would not require expansion
21 of the site boundary.

22 Operational access would continue to rely on the
23 project's internal access roads and no new off-site roads
24 would be required. Emergency access would likewise remain
25 consistent with the project's overall fire protection

1 strategy.

2 Overall, the alternative is generally feasible
3 because it reduces electrical infrastructure needs and
4 maintains a more compact layout, but would still require
5 careful engineering, refinement, biological review and
6 internal site planning to ensure compatibility with project
7 objectives and resource constraints. Although noting that
8 this alternative is extremely constrained, the applicant
9 considers it a feasible alternative.

10 Given the scale of the overall facility and
11 associated visual characteristics for this alternative,
12 there would still be no change to the visual resources
13 related impacts compared to the proposed project and this
14 impact would remain significant and unavoidable.

15 Next slide, please.

16 Oh, I shall pass -- this concludes the
17 alternatives analysis and pass the mic over to Kaycee Chang
18 for Opt-In requirements and next steps.

19 MS. CHANG: Thank you, Lisa.

20 Next slide, please.

21 As part of the Opt-In program, there are
22 mandatory requirements that the projects must meet. Today,
23 we are highlighting three of particular interest. For
24 labor, we conclude that the construction of the project is
25 not a covered project subject to public works. The

1 applicant has submitted -- the applicant has committed to
2 provisions of the Labor Code to paying prevailing wages,
3 and to using a skilled and trained workforce.

4 Next slide.

5 Under Public Resources Code section 25545.9(b),
6 there is a rebuttable presumption that the construction or
7 operation of the facility will have an overall net positive
8 economic benefit to San Bernardino County.

9 Next slide.

10 For the requirement that the applicant must enter
11 into one or more legally binding and enforceable agreements
12 with or that benefit a community-based organization, the
13 applicant submitted an executed agreement with the Friends
14 of El Mirage. According to the mission of the Friends of
15 El Mirage, the organization is a varied group of outdoor
16 recreationalists using the El Mirage OHV Open Area and
17 promoting the preservation, multiple use, and restoration
18 of the area.

19 The charitable donation is to support the
20 following projects: one, improve, protect, and maintain
21 existing trails and dry lake beds; and promote
22 understanding, education, and cooperation between all open
23 space users.

24 Next slide.

25 The bighorn sheep buffer and relocated vest

1 Alternative 2 would reduce the impacts to desert bighorn
2 sheep to less than significant. Since staff recommends the
3 CEC certify the environmentally superior alternative, a
4 statement of overriding considerations is not evaluated for
5 impacts to biological resources. However, impacts to
6 visual resources would remain significant and unavoidable.
7 Specifically, staff concludes, given the existing physical
8 landscape, the project would substantially degrade the
9 existing visual character or quality of public views of the
10 site and its surroundings from the 11 applicant-submitted
11 key observation points.

12 While staff concludes there is a significant and
13 unavoidable impact to visual resources, the project
14 provides regional economic benefits, construction and
15 engineering jobs, grid reliability benefits, support for
16 California's renewable energy and greenhouse gas emission
17 reduction goals, and displacement of fossil fuel generation
18 and corresponding air pollution.

19 Thus, staff concludes there is substantial and
20 compelling evidence in the record to support a CEC decision
21 to approve the project by issuing a statement of overriding
22 considerations.

23 Next slide, please.

24 Today, we will be taking oral comments on the
25 Staff Assessment. Written comments on the Staff Assessment

1 can be submitted to the project docket until 5:00 p.m. on
2 February 27th, 2026. We will respond to all comments
3 raising significant environmental issues and make edits to
4 the analysis, if necessary, in the Updated Staff Assessment
5 which will be filed on March 27th, 2026, along with the
6 Executive Director's recommendation. The CEC is planning
7 to consider the Soda Mountain Solar Project's Opt-In
8 application at the April 27th, 2026 business meeting.

9 I would like to invite the applicant to the
10 podium to make remarks. After applicant remarks, we will
11 take a break and then follow with a brief presentation from
12 the Office of the Public Advisor, Energy Equity, and Tribal
13 Affairs on public participation and tribal consultation
14 overview before opening this meeting up for public comment.

15 Thank you.

16 MS. ARKIN: Good afternoon. My name is Hannah
17 Arkin, and I am the CEO of Resolution Environmental,
18 serving today as the applicant's representative for the
19 Soda Mountain Solar Project. Can you hear me now? Okay.

20 On behalf of the applicant team, I'd first like
21 to thank the California Energy Commission for its hard work
22 implementing the AB 205 process.

23 The AB 205 process is doing a tremendous job
24 accelerating clean energy siting, permitting, financing,
25 transmission, and project development throughout

1 California. It is imperative that renewable energy
2 developers can capture expiring federal tax credits while
3 supporting reliability, affordability, and decarbonization.
4 And we appreciate the state's effort to meet us at the
5 moment so that we can work together to achieve this goal.

6 The Soda Mountain Solar Project is a large-scale
7 infrastructure project that utilizes state-of-the-art solar
8 energy generation and battery energy storage technology.
9 The project will include a 300-megawatt solar facility
10 paired with 300 megawatts of battery storage, enough to
11 power more than 140,000 homes. This energy generation
12 equates to roughly one-fifth of all households in the
13 county of San Bernardino, and a project of this scale will
14 help stabilize rolling blackouts.

15 The project site is prime for renewable energy
16 development because it's located directly adjacent to
17 existing large-scale infrastructure projects, including the
18 I-15, the Brightline West high-speed rail project, and
19 existing high-voltage transmission lines.

20 The project also offers a model for safely
21 locating solar and battery energy storage facilities far
22 away from residential areas, clustered adjacent to dense
23 infrastructure projects, and connecting to underutilized
24 transmission lines, which prevents the need for new
25 transmission lines to be constructed in wilderness or

1 populated areas.

2 In 2007, the project applicant submitted a
3 project on the same site that covered 4,179 acres of BLM
4 land and had a development footprint of approximately 2,222
5 acres. In March 2016, the BLM, Bureau of Land Management,
6 issued a Record of Decision and approved a project
7 configuration that removed 571 acres from the proposed
8 development specifically to reduce impacts to visual
9 resources and account for the future efforts to restore
10 connectivity for desert bighorn sheep. The project
11 proposed today maintains the removal of those 571 acres to
12 minimize impacts to desert bighorn sheep, in addition to
13 implementing additional biological and hydrological
14 mitigation that significantly minimizes other environmental
15 impacts.

16 Additionally, the staff recommended
17 environmentally superior alternative, the bighorn sheep
18 buffer, and relocated BESS Alternative 2 provides a
19 biological buffer for the bighorn sheep and moves the BESS
20 facility 500 feet east of the highway, which further
21 reduces the environmental impacts of the project.

22 This alternative is the result of an exhaustive
23 and creative engineering process between the developer, the
24 owner, environmental and biological consultants, civil
25 design engineers, resource agencies, and the CEC, and it

1 identifies a project where we are truly maximizing the
2 available site with highly efficient design and equipment,
3 while also implementing conservation measures to address
4 biological resource concerns.

5 Although it is not the applicant's preferred
6 project, the staff-recommended environmentally-superior
7 alternative, the bighorn sheep buffer and relocated BESS
8 Alternative 2 is a feasible project that the applicant can
9 develop.

10 The applicant team, we have reviewed the Staff
11 Assessment and would like to note a few points for
12 clarification. Our team will also be following up with the
13 detailed written comments prior to the close of the public
14 comment period.

15 The applicant team is concerned that the
16 mitigation ratios and acreage requirements identified in
17 the Staff Assessment identify the worst-case scenario
18 project and the identified mitigation ratios and acreages
19 do not account for the significant reduction of habitat
20 impacts that would occur from implementations of the
21 applicant's voluntary use of advanced technology terrain
22 following solar tracker system. This system is described
23 in detail within Docket item TN261587, or Appendix Z.

24 For example, implementation of the advanced
25 technology terrain following solar tracker system

1 identified in Appendix Z significantly reduces the amount
2 of grading on site under the solar field. Implementation
3 of this grading technology reduces the project's permanent
4 impacts on biological resources by nearly 90 percent.
5 Using the grading technology would result in the project's
6 permanent impacts to habitats being reduced from 1,506
7 acres to 79 acres. The applicant team will be providing
8 clarifying information prior to the close of the public
9 review period to help the CEC clarify the project's true
10 post construction impacts and mitigation requirements.

11 We're also concerned that the identified
12 mitigation ratios and acreages do not account for
13 implementation of Condition of Certification Water 9.
14 Condition of Certification Water 9 requires the project
15 implement a fluvial geomorphic stormwater design that
16 significantly reduces the amount of stormwater
17 infrastructure constructed by the project. Implementation
18 of Condition of Certification Water 9 reduces the project's
19 grading in earthwork by nearly 95 percent. After
20 implementation of Condition of Certification Water 9, net
21 grading of the project site would be approximately 20,000
22 cubic yards rather than 489,000 cubic yards.

23 We believe the Staff Assessment reflects a
24 worst-case project scenario that identifies up to three
25 times more impacts to water resources than would occur

1 after implementation of the grading technology identified
2 in Appendix Z and implementation of Condition of
3 Certification Water 9.

4 Beyond these two specific mitigation measures,
5 the project is also implementing other mitigation to offset
6 the environmental impacts of the project including
7 compensatory biological resources mitigation, wildlife
8 fencing that will be designed to allow reentry of desert
9 tortoise, and to direct animals towards designated under
10 crossings to prevent the obstruction of movement. Given
11 the project's design and the extensive efforts to preserve
12 biological resources, a reduction in the compensatory
13 mitigation to offset the loss of any species of concern is
14 appropriate.

15 Permitting development within the State of
16 California is an extremely challenging process and we are
17 so grateful to the CEC's Opt-In process for helping provide
18 a CEQA Plus environmental review process that offers a
19 comprehensive stakeholder engagement under an expedited
20 timeline. The applicant team has done our best to show a
21 very good faith effort to present a project and project
22 alternative that significantly reduces the impacts,
23 environmental impacts of concern that the public and the
24 resource agency have identified. Our team stands ready to
25 execute a state-of-the-art renewable energy and battery

1 storage project, including delivering a modified project
2 design referred to as the staff-recommended
3 environmentally-superior alternative, the bighorn sheep
4 buffer and relocated BESS Alternative 2.

5 The applicant team, we appreciate the opportunity
6 to provide these comments today. And that concludes the
7 applicant's remarks.

8 MS. CHANG: Thank you, Hannah. And thank you all
9 for sitting through our presentations.

10 We will now take a 15-minute break, returning
11 around 2:20 p.m., and then we will proceed with the Public
12 Advisor's presentation and public comment. Thank you.

13 (Off the record at 2:04 p.m.)

14 (On the record at 2:23 p.m.)

15 MS. CHANG: Hi everyone. We're going to get back
16 started.

17 Can we get the next slide, please?

18 All right, I would like to invite Acting Public
19 Advisor Ryan Young for the presentation.

20 MR. YOUNG: Good afternoon. Again, I'm Ryan
21 Briscoe Young, the Acting Public Advisor for the California
22 Energy Commission. Today, I'll be presenting on how
23 members of the public, California Native American tribes,
24 and others can participate in this proceeding.

25 Next slide, please.

1 As mentioned previously, I'm with the Office of
2 Public Advisor, Energy Equity, and Tribal Affairs. Part of
3 our mission is to facilitate public and tribal engagement
4 in CEC programs and policies. We are a free resource
5 available to anyone who wants to participate in CEC
6 proceedings, including this Soda Mountain proceeding. I'll
7 be sharing our contact information on a later slide.

8 Next slide, please.

9 Now I'll talk about different ways to participate
10 in the CEC Soda Mountain proceeding. There are multiple
11 ways you can participate. The first is to follow the
12 proceeding. Another is to comment on the proceeding. And
13 the third option available to California Native American
14 tribes is tribal consultation.

15 Next slide.

16 I'll now go into more detail on how to follow
17 this proceeding.

18 The microphone is on.

19 MS. ANDERSON: Sorry, something happened with the
20 slide. Give me just one second. I'm sorry, Ryan. It went
21 back to the beginning. I don't know what happened. What
22 slide am I supposed to be in, multiple ways to participate;
23 is that correct, Ryan?

24 MR. YOUNG: Follow via web, email, and events.

25 MS. ANDERSON: Okay. Thank you.

1 MR. YOUNG: Okay, I will now go into more detail
2 on how to follow this proceeding.

3 One of the most popular ways to participate in
4 our programs and policies is to simply follow them. You
5 can follow our proceedings by reviewing materials we post
6 on our website, signing up for email updates, and by
7 attending events like the one here today. Our events are
8 almost always hybrid or fully virtual via Zoom, so the
9 public can attend our events from anywhere with a phone or
10 internet connection.

11 On this slide, you'll see a snapshot of the CEC
12 webpage for the proposed Soda Mountain project. It has
13 information on the proposed project and project status. It
14 also has a place where you can subscribe for free email
15 updates on the project under the subscribe section.
16 There's also a link to submit written comments directly to
17 a project docket and a link to the entire project docket.

18 So, what is a docket?

19 The CEC has publicly available online dockets for
20 its proceedings. This is basically a place where
21 application materials, public comments, notices, agendas,
22 and other documents are filed and available online.

23 On this slide, the image to the right is of the
24 docket for the proposed Soda Mountain project. With few
25 exceptions, all materials in the docket are linked and

1 available for anyone to download and view for free.

2 Next slide, please.

3 Another way to participate is to comment. As in
4 all CEC programs and policies, any person can comment
5 verbally at a CEC event or in writing. Please note that
6 comments will become part of the public record with access
7 available via any search engine on the internet. To
8 comment verbally, just attend the event and wait for the
9 instructions during the public comment period to make your
10 comment. For our hybrid events, you can comment in-person,
11 via Zoom, or by phone. Coming up on our agenda is just
12 such a public comment period.

13 The CEC also welcomes written comments. As I
14 stated before, on the CEC website, we have what is called a
15 docket for each project proceeding. Written comments can
16 be submitted to the docket for the proceeding at any time,
17 but the most effective time to do so is during announced
18 comment periods. On our website, you can submit a comment
19 electronically by typing it into our e-comment page or
20 uploading a document, such as a letter. We also have email
21 and paper options to submit a comment that are detailed in
22 the notice for today's event.

23 If you need assistance, you can always contact
24 the Office of the Public Advisor, Energy Equity, and Tribal
25 Affairs. I'll have our contact information on the last

1 slide.

2 Next slide, please.

3 The CEC has invited tribal consultation in this
4 and other Opt-In proceedings. William Larson from the CEC
5 Siting Division is available for inquiries and other
6 communications from California Native American tribes.

7 Next slide, please.

8 Thank you for attending this meeting and your
9 interest in this proceeding. We're here to serve the state
10 of California, and your participation is a big part of the
11 process.

12 Here's the contact information for the Office of
13 the Public Advisor. My office is available to assist you
14 in participating in our programs and policies.

15 And just a reminder to turn in your blue card to
16 the Public Advisor's table should you wish to make a
17 comment shortly.

18 Okay, the Energy Commission now welcomes public
19 comment at this time. And before we move to general public
20 comment, we're going to begin with comments from government
21 entities, including local, state, and federal agencies, as
22 well as California Native American tribes. If you
23 represent a government entity, including a California
24 Native American tribe, and you're in the room, please
25 approach the podium. If you're on Zoom, please click the

1 raised hand feature on the screen, and it looks like an
2 open palm. If you're joining us by phone, you're going to
3 press star nine to raise your hand.

4 We're going to start with commenters here in-
5 person, and then we'll transition to online and phone
6 attendees. And again, if you're a member of the public, we
7 please ask that you wait until you've heard from the
8 government entities here today. And we'll continue with
9 general public comments immediately thereafter.

10 All right, if you're with a government entity,
11 and you haven't yet raised your hand, please do so now. It
12 doesn't look like -- oh, welcome. Please approach the
13 podium. State and spell your name for the record, and we
14 welcome your public comment.

15 MR. MUNSEY: Good afternoon. Dan Munsey, San
16 Bernardino County Fire Protection District. I want to
17 thank the Commission for including our comments we've made
18 in writing about this geographical area.

19 We protect a county of 22,000 square miles,
20 20,000 within our jurisdiction. This particular project
21 areas of concern is identified in your documents because of
22 the lack of resources in this particular area. We have one
23 fire engine in the community of Baker. The engine is
24 staffed with four people, but its response is 3,000 square
25 miles. So at any given time, they may be two hours from

1 this particular project.

2 The second concern is environmental factors. And
3 while there's been a risk analysis done through the State
4 of California, you must remember that this particular area
5 is very close to Death Valley with temperatures that often
6 increase to 118 to 120 degrees. It can also be very
7 freezing and cold in the winter with snowfall. These and
8 other complications make it very difficult to protect this.

9 I acknowledge that in Section 4.4, there's Safety
10 that states that the applicant must meet with the fire
11 department to come to an agreement. My concern is in
12 reviewing the documents, I can't find out what kind of
13 agreement that would be, the timeline, so it would be --
14 and if that agreement would be forced.

15 Because of these needs, I respectfully ask the
16 Commission to address those issues.

17 Thank you.

18 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

19 If there are any other representatives of local
20 government entities in the room, please approach the podium
21 and provide your comment.

22 Seeing none, I'm going to transition to Zoom.
23 First, we have Brandy Wood, followed by Moises Cisneros.

24 Brandy Wood, I'm going to unmute you. Please
25 unmute on your end, state and spell your name for the

1 record, and we welcome your public comment. Hi, Brandy,
2 you're going to want to unmute on your end.

3 MS. WOOD: Thank you. Can you hear me?

4 MR. YOUNG: We can. Thank you.

5 MS. WOOD: My name is Brandy Wood. I'm an
6 Environmental Program Manager at CDFW in Region 6.

7 CDFW appreciates this opportunity to provide
8 comments and recommendations regarding the proposed project
9 activities that may affect California's fish and wildlife
10 resources. CDFW is California's trustee agency for fish
11 and wildlife resources and holds those resources in trust
12 by statute for all the people of the state.

13 Normally, the proposed project would require one
14 or more discretionary approvals by CDFW because it may
15 result in substantial adverse impacts to fish and wildlife
16 resources, such as lake and streambed alteration and
17 incidental take of species protected under the California
18 Endangered Species Act, and CDFW would have submitted
19 comments as a responsible agency under the California
20 Environmental Quality Act.

21 However, because the project proponent opted into
22 the Assembly Bill 205 certification process, the CEC has
23 exclusive jurisdiction over the proposed project and is
24 responsible for ensuring any certification of proposed
25 project, including all conditions necessary to ensure

1 compliance with Fish and Game Code and its implementing
2 regulations.

3 CDFW does not have a direct permitting role in
4 the process that would trigger a responsible agency role.
5 CDFW instead submits these comments as a trustee agency
6 under CEQA.

7 Pursuant to AB 205, the CEC and CDFW developed a
8 coordination plan through a memorandum of understanding to
9 ensure that all potential impacts to fish, wildlife, and
10 plant resources and the habitats upon which they depend,
11 including but not limited to the incidental take of species
12 protected under the California Endangered Species Act, are
13 consistent with Fish and Game Code and its implementing
14 regulations found in Title 14.

15 The project has applied for incidental take of
16 desert tortoise and western burrowing owl, and CDFW has
17 provided guidance and recommendations to the CEC to avoid,
18 minimize, and mitigate impacts to those species, meeting
19 the requirements for full mitigation.

20 Additionally, we have collaborated on the impact
21 analysis of stream delineations and other fish and wildlife
22 resources within the project footprint.

23 Desert bighorn sheep are a protected species
24 under Fish and Game Code. CDFW has shared with CEC a
25 document from June 2024 that was produced when CDFW was

1 proposed to be the CEQA lead agency for the project. The
2 report entitled Desert Bighorn Sheep Study: Soda Mountain
3 Solar Project, evaluated potential impacts for the desert
4 bighorn sheep from the project, and included a suite of
5 recommendations -- sorry, of recommended mitigation
6 measures for those impacts.

7 Ultimately, the project proponent decided to
8 withdraw from the CDFW-led process and apply for the
9 streamlined AB 205 process led by the CEC. CDFW did not
10 publish for public review any of the environmental
11 documents produced during that time.

12 To avoid significant negative impacts to the
13 population, desert bighorn sheep must maintain the ability
14 to forage on the flats beyond the toe of the slopes and
15 maintain the stepping-stone connectivity function of those
16 intermediate hills south of the proposed development.
17 Conserving these key habitats and maintaining a sufficient
18 buffer zone from project impacts is essential for
19 preventing significant impacts to this desert bighorn sheep
20 population.

21 CDFW appreciates the opportunity to have engaged
22 with CEC staff and the project proponent in numerous
23 meetings for the project.

24 Thank you.

25 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

1 I'd next like to welcome Kevin Emmerich. And
2 just another reminder that we're currently hearing from
3 local government entities first. Kevin, I'm going to
4 unmute your line. Please unmute on your end, state and
5 spell your name for the record and begin your public
6 comment. Kevin, you might want to unmute on your end and
7 you can begin your comment. Doesn't sound like we can hear
8 you. We'll try and come back to you in just a moment.

9 I'm next going to recognize Randy Banis. Randy,
10 I'm going to unmute your line. Please state and spell your
11 name for the record, and we welcome your public comment.

12 MR. BANIS: Thank you. Am I coming in loud and
13 clear?

14 MR. YOUNG: We can hear you. Thank you.

15 MR. BANIS: My name is Randy Banis, spelled
16 R-A-N-D-Y B-A-N-I-S. I'm President of Friends of El
17 Mirage. The --

18 MR. YOUNG: Sir, I apologize. This is for local
19 government entities first. We'll come back to members of
20 the general public in just a minute.

21 MR. BANIS: Thank you.

22 MR. YOUNG: Thank you. We'll keep your place in
23 queue.

24 Okay, I'm now going to transition to the public
25 comment period. Comments are going to be three minutes or

1 less. Again, please state and spell your name for the
2 record.

3 I'd first like to welcome Scott Gibson. Welcome,
4 Scott. Please approach the podium and give your public
5 comment.

6 MR. GIBSON: Hello, and thank you for having me.
7 My name is Scott Gibson. I represent the California
8 Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation. I'm also a volunteer
9 with the Society for the Conservation of Bighorn Sheep.
10 These organizations together have been involved in habitat
11 conservation related to bighorn sheep since the 1960s.

12 I am a conservationist, a hunter, and a volunteer
13 for public land restoration efforts. I live, work,
14 recreate, and love our public lands in the Mojave Desert.

15 I am opposed to this project. It will have a
16 detrimental effect on the recovery and connectivity of
17 desert bighorn sheep. The science submitted by the
18 nation's leading bighorn sheep experts makes it clear this
19 project would cause irreversible ecological damage. This
20 project could also harm or negate decades of conservation
21 work by my organizations and the many volunteers who have
22 given their time and treasure to help our desert bighorn
23 sheep.

24 The Soda Mountain sheep population is one of the
25 most important in the state. This is due to its location

1 and its ability to support wildlife connectivity from Death
2 Valley all the way through to Joshua Tree National Park.

3 Desert bighorn sheep and other wildlife are
4 integral to the cultural economic fabric of our desert
5 communities. Wildlife viewing and sportsman's activities
6 have long been pillars of our rural traditions. Any harm
7 to sheep and the other wildlife populations undermine these
8 activities.

9 In addition, any reduction of sheep movement
10 between the Soda and Cady Mountains with neighboring herds
11 and mountain rangers south of the I-15 would certainly
12 decrease these opportunities and would reduce or eliminate
13 California citizens' hunting and viewing opportunities.

14 There are alternatives to the proposed Soda
15 Mountain plan submitted by leading bighorn sheep biologists
16 and connectivity experts. These alternatives are not going
17 to be implemented according to the current plan.

18 The overall Soda Mountain Solar Project isn't
19 good for our desert bighorn sheep and other wildlife. It's
20 problematic. The project has been rejected previously by
21 the county and is opposed by the National Park Service.
22 The State of California should be protecting our bighorn
23 sheep and other sensitive wildlife.

24 This project will negatively affect the proposed
25 \$35 million in taxpayer funded wildlife overcrossing over

1 the I-15 freeway as part of the high-speed rail system.
2 This project will likely negate the many decades of bighorn
3 sheep water development projects volunteers from my
4 organizations have built in the area. I urge you to reject
5 this project.

6 Thank you.

7 MR. YOUNG: Thank you for your comments.

8 I'd next like to welcome Debra Hughson. Debra,
9 please state and spell your name for the record and we
10 welcome your public comment. Comments will be three
11 minutes or less. And after Debra we'll hear from Neal
12 Desai.

13 MS. HUGHSON: Hello. Okay. Debra Hughson,
14 D-E-B-R-A H-U-G-H-S-O-N. I would like to just follow up on
15 the comments that Scott has made.

16 I heard earlier in the discussion from biology
17 about the Soda Mountain herd. I think you need to take a
18 step back from that. The Soda Mountain herd would not
19 exist without its connection to Camp Cady. And in fact, if
20 you look at this in a bigger picture in terms of the
21 metapopulation dynamics, the Soda Mountain connection is
22 the single most important connectivity for the entire
23 metapopulation of Mojave Desert bighorn sheep. It's the
24 only place that connects demographic connectivity between
25 the east and the west half and, thus, is important. It's

1 essential for the maintaining of the entire metapopulation
2 of Mojave Desert bighorn sheep. It's very exceedingly
3 important.

4 And then I think you need to step back and take
5 another look at the bigger picture here. What we're
6 talking about here on a global scale is transitioning from
7 a carbon-based economy to a renewable-based economy. And I
8 think we all understand the importance of that. But look
9 at this in terms of a bigger picture. Here you have a very
10 small project in terms of footprint compared to other
11 projects that are going on, yet it has enormous overarching
12 negative impacts. And so your trade-off here is really
13 poor. You're accepting tremendous impacts to an iconic
14 desert species for what? For a negligible improvement in
15 our carbon footprint.

16 And so I agree with Scott that this project
17 should not be constructed.

18 Thank you.

19 MR. YOUNG: Thank you for your comments.

20 Neal, please approach the podium, state and spell
21 your name for the record, and we welcome your public
22 comment.

23 MR. DESAI: Good. Am I on? Yeah. Hi. Neal
24 Desai. N-E-A-L D-E-S-A-I. Good afternoon. Thank you,
25 Commissioner, Executive Director, and Chris here for

1 joining us and others. So it was a few months ago out in
2 the field. I represent the National Parks Conservation
3 Association. We've been advocating for the protection of
4 our national parks.

5 Debra, I want to thank you for your public
6 service for the National Park Service over decades. You're
7 retired now, but thank you for everything that you've done
8 for the Mojave Desert.

9 We continue to be very strongly opposed to this
10 project.

11 And I also want to preface by saying we were very
12 much involved in the establishment of the DRECP. That
13 created red light zones, yellow light, green light to help
14 renewable energy developers have certainty. This project,
15 this dumpster fire of an application, has been around since
16 2007. We're in this fourth application -- or fourth owner.
17 Everyone has tried to move it forward, and it keeps on
18 getting stopped by the county, and thank you, San
19 Bernardino County, by the National Park Service, thank you
20 very much for all of your work in opposing this since over
21 a decade ago, and this is not a place designated for smart-
22 from-the-start solar planning.

23 So what are we doing? Like what's going on here?
24 And it's tough to -- it's tough to not think that things
25 are a little cooked here, okay, and I just want to share a

1 few things.

2 So the nation's leading bighorn sheep experts
3 have submitted information. It was commissioned by the
4 National Park Service. It's submitted to you all. It's
5 from 2025. Nothing in the staff report dismisses any of
6 those conclusions. The staff report doesn't even respond
7 to those recommendations. There's not even an alternative.
8 There's not even an alternative that gives the public and
9 everyone else an opportunity to look at what has been
10 recommended.

11 I think I just heard CFW say that the science
12 that they put together wasn't even intended to be a
13 published document. And that document says that this is
14 just a recommendation from their quarter-mile buffer or
15 something from 2013, an informal recommendation from 2014.
16 So we have the nation's leading bighorn sheep biologists
17 telling the CEC, this could lead to late local extinction
18 of a population.

19 You have all of us telling you that we are
20 risking California is risking \$35 million in taxpayer
21 funded wildlife crossing, risking it. Why? This is not an
22 issue of first impression either. We've dealt with this.
23 We've dealt with this for over 10 years. It's been
24 rejected by the county here.

25 And so it's tough, it's just tough to think that

1 things are not a little bit cooked here; right? The
2 pressure that you're under, it almost seems very comparable
3 to the BLM when the Park Service was opposing it, and they
4 were told, hey, you got to approve this anyways.

5 We ask you to oppose this. We ask you to listen
6 to the scientists. We ask you to put forward an
7 alternative, put it back up to the public.

8 Thank you.

9 MR. YOUNG: Please conclude your remarks. Thank
10 you. Thank you for your comments.

11 We're next going to go to Mason Osgood, and then
12 Chance Wilcox. Mason, please approach the podium, state
13 and spell your name for the record. Comments will be three
14 minutes or less. And we appreciate your public comments.

15 MR. OSGOOD: Thank you. My name is Mason Osgood,
16 M-A-S-O-N O-S-G-O-O-D. I'm a resident of Joshua Tree. I'm
17 here to read a statement by Jacob Overson. That's
18 J-A-C-O-B O-V-E-R-S-O-N, who is unfortunately unable to
19 attend.

20 "Commissioners, my name is Jacob Overson. I am born
21 and raised in Baker, the nearest town to the project
22 site. Our family ranched in this region for
23 generations. I'm also a board member for the Baker
24 Community Services District, and the district is
25 strongly opposed to this project.

1 "Our community has supported efforts to help bring
2 wildlife back to this region. The bighorn sheep and
3 the Mojave National Preserve are very important to our
4 community. We are already in a fragile balance here
5 with wildlife, and this solar project will disrupt
6 this balance.

7 "The desert is not a wasteland. The people who live
8 out here love it and love their wildlife. We do not
9 want to see this project.

10 "We worked with the county to stop this project, but
11 now the company and you are bringing it back. That is
12 not respectful to our community. There is a place for
13 solar, and this is not the place."

14 Thank you.

15 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

16 Chance Wilcox, we welcome your public comment.

17 Comments will be three minutes or less.

18 MR. WILCOX: Thank you. My name is Chance
19 Wilcox, C-H-A-N-C-E W-I-L-C-O-X. I direct the California
20 Desert Program for the National Parks Conservation
21 Association, and I'm a resident of the Mojave Desert.

22 We're all Californians. We love renewable
23 energy, or many of us in this room love renewable energy,
24 and the desert provides perfect opportunities for solar
25 development. However, not all sites are perfect for solar

1 development. And it has been proven time and time again
2 that the Soda Mountains are not the place for development.

3 I urge you not to accept a renewable energy
4 project that isn't right just to continue California's
5 incredible opportunities and reputation for celebrating
6 renewable energy development. This project isn't right.

7 The site is not zoned for solar development by
8 the DRECP and is immediately next to Mojave National
9 Preserve, established by federal legislation for its
10 biological, scenic, recreational, and cultural importance.
11 Scientists have continuously demonstrated that the project,
12 even with a quarter of a mile buffer, would not only have
13 immense negative impacts on Mojave Desert bighorn sheep
14 populations and genetic diversity, but would also
15 jeopardize the effectiveness of a future wildlife crossing
16 over I-15 that Caltrans has already approved millions of
17 taxpayer dollars to construct.

18 I have stood at the future site of that
19 overcrossing, where you can see the proposed site for the
20 Soda Mountain Solar Project, and I have looked up at a
21 bighorn ram curiously looking down at me.

22 The National Park Service has opposed the
23 project. The county has previously rejected the project.
24 Scientists have told you this project isn't right. You
25 said yourself that you would not want to permit or approve

1 a project that you wouldn't want in your own backyard or
2 neighborhood, but community members have told you, who live
3 here in the Mojave Desert, that this project is not right
4 for these communities or for their backyard, where they
5 recreate, where they appreciate the beauty, and they
6 appreciate the wildlife that are representative of these
7 communities and this desert.

8 And with that in mind, I ask you to oppose this
9 project and accept a no-project alternative.

10 Thank you.

11 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

12 Pat Flanagan, we'd like to welcome you to the
13 podium. And after that, we'll hear from Erin Gatlin.

14 Pat, please state and spell your name for the
15 record. Comments will be three minutes or less, and we
16 welcome your comments.

17 MS. FLANAGAN: Okay. Thank you. Do we hear me?
18 Okay. My name is Pat Flanagan, P-A-T F-L-A-N-A-G-A-N. I'm
19 with the Morongo Basin Conservation Association. I am also
20 a resident of the Mojave Desert, and I have been suffering
21 from dust from the very first solar projects that were
22 built in Joshua Tree back in 2013, which brought me to talk
23 to you today because there's going to be a dust problem
24 where this project is proposed.

25 I brought a number of documents which I will pass

1 on to you.

2 The first one is from the USGS, United States
3 Geological Survey, assessing the geology and geography of
4 large footprint energy installations in the Mojave Desert,
5 California, and Nevada. And from their abstract, I get
6 about 48 percent of the entire area is less than a 5
7 percent slope, and 8.3 is less than 1 percent slope, the
8 favored slope category. That's what we're getting. For
9 this lowest slope category, deposits underlying about 98
10 percent of the area are either mixed aeolian alluvial
11 origin or fine-grained alluvial deposits, and you found
12 those, and thus are susceptible to aeolian dust and sand
13 transport, especially after disturbance. So that gives us
14 a feeling for it's not unusual that there should be this
15 dust problem.

16 I've also given you an article here, *Sand*
17 *Transport Paths in the Mojave Desert, Southwestern United*
18 *States*, by James Zimbelman, in which you will look at the
19 sand transport paths, which are from the end of the ice
20 ages, and we get sand transport out of the dry lake beds.

21 Also very interesting is soil surface
22 susceptibility to wind erosion, another USGS project, and
23 they did their study in the Mojave Preserve. And I want
24 you to see their maps, which do the percent time per month
25 that a friction velocity is exceeded. And this is the

1 boundary, and the project is within the boundary. So you
2 can look at these and go, oh, they're going to get a lot of
3 wind a lot of the time.

4 To do dust controls, I found the best ones that
5 Lisa and I have found that are not going to destroy the
6 area, so it can -- well, it takes thousands of years to
7 recover, but it comes from the Owens Dry Lakebed, which
8 says you need four inches of crushed gravel on top of
9 fabric, and that will keep the dust down, and try that one.

10 We also need to know that the deserts of
11 California, in an undisturbed way, actually are
12 sequestering 10 percent of the state's carbon, and so it's
13 not that it's easy to go out and say, okay, that one out
14 there is 10 percent.

15 MR. YOUNG: Thank you. Please conclude your
16 comments.

17 MS. FLANAGAN: Okay. Done.

18 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

19 MS. FLANAGAN: There you go.

20 MS. PONCE: This Mariah Ponce from the CEC.

21 Mrs. Flanagan, if you would like the CEC to
22 consider your documents, if you can please upload those to
23 the docket? Thank you.

24 MR. YOUNG: The Public Advisor is available to
25 assist with that.

1 Erin Gatlin, please approach the podium. State
2 and spell your name for the record. We welcome to public
3 comment. And then we'll hear from Arch McCulloch.

4 MS. GATLIN: Can you hear me? Okay. My name is
5 Erin Gatlin. That's E-R-I-N G-A-T-L-I-N.

6 I would just really like to reinforce all the
7 comments that have already been offered today related to
8 the project and its impacts, which are recognized as being
9 not mitigatable as proposed in the preferred alternative.
10 It doesn't meet the recommendations by the recognized
11 biologists.

12 The community doesn't want it. The county has
13 already rejected it. It's not consistent with agreements
14 that were established in the DRECP or any other agreements,
15 including the agreement that established the need for
16 wildlife corridors and identified this location as an
17 appropriate one. Let's stop putting bad projects in the
18 Mojave Desert and focus on ways to instead make solar
19 energy more efficient in the state of California.

20 Thank you.

21 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

22 And for our last in-room public comment, we'd
23 like to hear from Arch McCulloch. Arch, please approach
24 the podium. State and spell your name for the record, and
25 we welcome your public comment.

1 MR. MCCULLOCH: Hi. Can you hear me? Great.
2 I'm Arch McCulloch, A-R-C-H M-C-C-U-L-L-O-C-H. I'm with
3 Morongo Basin Conservation Association. I want to thank
4 you for the opportunity to speak here.

5 I'll start out by saying that this is sort of a
6 project that is reluctant to just die. MBCA has opposed it
7 on, I think, about four different iterations. I have two
8 of those letters that we've written in opposition of it at
9 various times over the years. Most of those points we
10 brought up still hold.

11 Certainly. Okay, I'm sorry.

12 A lot of people have talked about a lot of
13 things. I'm going to try and pick up some of the things in
14 the noise.

15 For tortoises, you guys, in your report, have
16 this, which I think you guys will recognize, and I don't
17 know if anybody else can see it, but it shows desert
18 tortoise burrows and scat within the project area. I
19 assume that your mitigation for that is going to be move
20 the tortoises. And I want to tell you that's been tried
21 before and it has been uniformly unsuccessful, even when
22 they tried to move them to keep the neighboring tortoises
23 together, that it results in an overall 90 percent decrease
24 in the tortoise population after being moved. That's
25 highly skewed, even so, towards the male tortoises, which

1 means that after a single tortoise generation, you're
2 looking at something awfully close to 100 percent
3 mortality. And this was tried at the Marine base, and it's
4 been tried other places too.

5 Let's see. With other species that were shown on
6 the site, badger, kit fox, and the burrowing owls, I
7 suspect that the same kind of thing is true. I don't know
8 if you're planning on relocating them or letting them
9 relocate themselves, but either way, I think you're going
10 to look at very high mortality among the things there.

11 This project was rejected by San Bernardino
12 County, by the National Park Service, and is contrary to
13 another state agency, Caltrans, which was trying to put in
14 the overpass. I would say that the -- yeah, I've lost it.

15 The other thing I have, I'm skeptical of the 75-
16 acre claim for grading that was brought up. And Mr.
17 Knight, I have a slight correction for you. Highway 247
18 was declared a scenic highway in September of this year,
19 and I think that's closer than 25 miles.

20 Thank you very much.

21 MR. YOUNG: Thank you for your comments.

22 That concludes our in-room portion of public
23 comment. I'm now going to transition to Zoom and online.
24 If you are joining us by Zoom or by phone, please let us
25 know you'd like to make a comment. If you're joining us by

1 Zoom, please use the raised-hand feature. If you're online
2 and you're on the telephone and you want to join us, please
3 press star nine to raise your hand.

4 Before Scott Miller, I'm going to turn to Kevin
5 Emmerich. Kevin, I'm going to unmute your line. Please
6 state and spell your name for the record and we welcome
7 your public comment. Comments will be three minutes or
8 less.

9 MR. EMMERICH: Can you hear me now?

10 MR. YOUNG: Yes, we can. Thank you.

11 MR. EMMERICH: Thank you. My name is Kevin
12 Emmerich. K-E-V-I-N E-M-M-E-R-I-C-H.

13 First off, I want to say I'm with Basin and Range
14 Watch. We've followed and opposed this project since 2009.
15 We wish we didn't have to do it again. When the county
16 said no in 2016, we thought that was going to be final and
17 we were happy about that.

18 But your environmentally-superior alternative
19 removes about four square miles of bighorn sheep habitat,
20 that flat habitat that's very important to them. And
21 there's really not going to be any type of override that's
22 going to be able to mitigate this. It is one of the most
23 significant herds of desert bighorn in California. I
24 really urge you not to override that.

25 You can't mitigate a lithium battery fire by

1 moving a project around. So we do an alternative that
2 eliminates battery storage. And the Bonanza Peak Solar
3 Project, Charleston View, just eliminated their battery
4 storage. It can be done.

5 I'm skeptical that the water use, 500 acre-feet
6 for construction and 5 acre-feet a year, will not hurt the
7 Soda Springs complex. I'm urging you to review an
8 alternative that does not allow on-site wells.

9 The Old Spanish Trail is only a comprehensive
10 management strategy at this point. They were required to
11 make a management plan about 20-some years ago and still
12 have not. This needs to be held up until that plan can be
13 implemented.

14 The visual resource class is Class III, and under
15 federal standards and the DRECP, you need to do a plan
16 amendment to actually approve that. You have to downgrade
17 it to Class IV. You said it's not compatible. An
18 alternative that takes the gen-tie out of the ACEC would be
19 a good alternative and an alternative that eliminates all
20 grading would actually be a good alternative.

21 Again, please don't override this. If you do,
22 that does compromise your credibility as a regulating
23 agency.

24 Thank you.

25 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

1 We're next going to hear from Scott Miller, and
2 then Clinton Epps.

3 Scott, I'm going to unmute your line. Please
4 unmute on your end and we welcome your public comment.
5 Comments will be three minutes or less.

6 MR. MILLER: Hi. This is Scott Miller. Can you
7 hear me?

8 MR. YOUNG: Yes, we can. Thank you.

9 MR. MILLER: Okay, great. I'm Scott Miller. I'm
10 the Executive Director of the Western Power Trading Forum.
11 I'm here to express support for the Soda Mountain Solar and
12 Battery Storage Project.

13 WPTF has over 135 members which are participating
14 in achieving reliability and economic efficiency through
15 competitive markets. And this, we believe, has always
16 benefited customers and the needs of the western region.
17 Our members develop, own, and operate resources across all
18 11 states in the Western Interconnection.

19 The proposed facility has already been modified
20 significantly to try to accommodate the environmental needs
21 of the system. While they've done that, they've done
22 something very important. They've added 1,200 megawatts of
23 battery storage which provides a tremendous amount of
24 reliability and flexibility to the system, not only to
25 benefit California's reliability but also in California's

1 help of the rest of the Western region in terms of the
2 reliability which all the states share in.

3 The project has a critical role, certainly for
4 California and the grid, in reducing energy price
5 volatility, and also help in mitigating the possibility for
6 rolling blackouts as has been discussed.

7 The siting adjacent to the Interstate 15 and the
8 planned Southern California to Las Vegas rail corridor
9 minimizes the environmental and visual effects. And I will
10 say that after seeing developments that have occurred in
11 all 11 states in the Western region, this has been a
12 significant effort on the of the company to try to minimize
13 environmental effects while providing the region and
14 California itself with clean, reliable power that will
15 benefit economically and from a reliability standpoint.

16 So as a consequence, I would -- for all of these
17 reasons, I respectfully urge the California Energy
18 Commission to approve the Soda Mountain Solar Project, and
19 I thank you for your consideration.

20 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

21 After Clinton Epps, we're going to hear from GMM.
22 Clinton, please unmute on your end. I'm going to unmute
23 you. State and spell your name for the record, and we
24 welcome your comments.

25 MR. EPPS: Okay. Can you all hear me?

1 MR. YOUNG: Yes, we can. Thank you.

2 MR. EPPS: Thank you. So, my name is Clint Epps,
3 C-L-I-N-T E-P-P-S. I'm a professor of wildlife science at
4 Oregon State University and I'm speaking on my own behalf,
5 not on behalf of my university. I thank you all for the
6 opportunity to provide comment today.

7 I've been studying desert bighorn sheep in this
8 system since 1999, so this will be my 27th year of working
9 in this system. And I and members of my research group
10 have reviewed the potential impacts of this project and its
11 previous iterations and continue to have serious concerns
12 about it.

13 As other people have mentioned, this is a key
14 connectivity link. One thing that I have learned in these
15 decades of work on these animals is their ability to move
16 back and forth between these mountain ranges is critical
17 for recolonizing habitat when there's local extinctions,
18 for maintaining genetic diversity, which helps with
19 resilience to disease and other environmental issues.

20 I want to specifically mention that the 0.25-mile
21 offset that has been mentioned, we have submitted
22 information previously that show that that is inadequate.
23 That is a very old recommendation based on just sort of
24 general bighorn habitat use, but it comes from a time when
25 we did not have the precise spatial information provided by

1 GPS collars, which has been available in this system now
2 since 2013. And with those data, we see that in this
3 mountain range, more than 11 percent of the locations are
4 at slopes below 10 percent.

5 And those flats provide critical food resources
6 at times of the year when there's, you know, areas of
7 greenup, and this is a very nutritionally stressed
8 population. And so the ability of these animals to move
9 back and forth between the Sodas and the Cadys, most
10 critically, I think, in some ways in the long term, is this
11 potential to facilitate and restore movement across
12 Interstate 15, opens up new habitat, opens up gene flow and
13 connectivity.

14 And with the high-speed rail line that's been
15 proposed to come in, any kind of significant disruption,
16 which this solar facility absolutely will be, especially if
17 it's only a 0.25-mile setback, could really deplete the
18 ability of that crossing structure and all the work that's
19 gone into that to mitigate those problems.

20 So I urge strong consideration of the larger
21 buffer that we have recommended, which is somewhere between
22 0.6 and 1.2 miles, and most critically, delaying
23 construction until that wildlife crossing goes in. If it
24 is going to be built, wait until that crossing goes in and
25 animals can establish use. That's really critical. But

1 they really do need to be able to move back and forth
2 locally across the freeway and to be able to access those
3 habitats and vegetation on the flats.

4 So thanks again for the opportunity to speak.
5 And we really strongly urge you to consider all this
6 scientific information that we have been providing.

7 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

8 GMM, I'm going to unmute your line. Please
9 unmute on your end. State and spell your name for the
10 record. And we welcome your comments. Comments will be
11 three minutes or less. GMM, you're going to want to unmute
12 on your end.

13 MR. LARUE: Yes. Sorry, I didn't realize it was
14 LGMM. My name is Ed LaRue. And I am a tortoise biologist
15 with the Desert Tortoise Council.

16 MR. YOUNG: Would you state your name for the
17 record, please?

18 MR. LARUE: Sure. Edward, E-D-W-A-R-D, LaRue,
19 L-A capital -R-U-E.

20 And I appreciate that in the presentation with
21 visual resources that the DRECP was recognized. I'm
22 disappointed that our biologists didn't also talk about the
23 connection relative to the DRECP. My concern or
24 understanding is that this is not within a development
25 focus area as identified by the Bureau of Land Management

1 and its DRECP in 2016. Also, that it's not a Solar Energy
2 Zone as identified in the programmatic solar document that
3 came out from the BLM in 2012.

4 So I've walked the site in early iterations of
5 this, and the site is pristine. Despite it being proximate
6 to the open area, there's very little cross-country vehicle
7 travel out there. There aren't a lot of tortoises there,
8 but the scientists throughout the years, and also in the
9 DRECP, are encouraging this kind of development to go on in
10 degraded habitats, brownfields, and that sort of thing.

11 The thing that I find really kind of disingenuous
12 is, is that you've shackled all your alternatives to a
13 single corridor. There's been no discussion about where
14 this energy is being transported. And my guess is if it's
15 being transported to the south, that there are going to be
16 degraded habitats closer to the targeted source for this
17 energy than to develop something in the middle of the
18 desert and transport it hundreds of miles into places that
19 are already biologically impaired.

20 The other thing I'm not hearing discussed, and I
21 was really concerned when I was at the public meeting last
22 year, that the proponent seems to have shackled itself to
23 the off-highway vehicle group and was talking about putting
24 infrastructure in the Razor Open Area, which is on BLM
25 lands, as a goodwill gesture to off-highway vehicle users.

1 My concern is, is that the proximity of the solar site to
2 an open area will result in increased dust generation, and
3 that that dust will actually impair the efficacy of the
4 solar shields and so forth, but will also require that you
5 have to use more water in order to wash the dust off of
6 that site.

7 So the Tortoise Council has been opposed to this
8 from the very beginning. I believe that every issue we've
9 ever raised in this is still valid, so we will resubmit all
10 of our comments so that a different lead agency, in this
11 case the CEC, can hopefully consider our concerns and
12 reject this project.

13 So thank you much.

14 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

15 Moises Cisneros, I'm going to unmute your line.
16 Please unmute on your end, state and spell your name for
17 the record, and we welcome your public comment.

18 Okay, Ben, I'm going to unmute your line. Please
19 state and spell your name for the record, and we welcome
20 your public comment.

21 MR. PRATT: Good afternoon, my name is Ben Pratt,
22 B-E-N P-R-A-T-T. I currently serve as Vice President of
23 IBEW Local 477. We represent approximately 1,400
24 electricians in San Bernardino, Inyo, and Mono County, many
25 of whom are residents of the I-15 corridor. Our residents

1 that live up in the high desert region are constantly
2 forced to travel down the Cajon Pass for work, and this
3 provides a great opportunity for them to work where they
4 live. This locally sourced workforce that we offer
5 definitely meets the skilled and trained requirement for
6 this project. Local 477 has been operating in the solar
7 and BESS space since its inception.

8 I would like to add that BESS technology has come
9 a long way since it began. These fires tend to be
10 compartmentalized and very rare, especially if installed by
11 skilled and trained personnel.

12 Also, I would like to add that the IBEW is
13 committed to outreach and partnership with the communities.
14 Currently, we're working with Barstow Community College to
15 provide opportunities for apprenticeship for recently-
16 separated veterans and those active duty members that are
17 approaching their end of active service.

18 Additionally, there is a massive deficit in the
19 grid that needs to be met. Grid expansion equals
20 affordability for ratepayers and is definitely beneficial
21 to the mitigation of blackouts.

22 For all those reasons, IBEW 477 supports this
23 project. Thank you for your time.

24 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

25 Jason Becker, I'm going to unmute your line.

1 Please stay and spell your name for the record and welcome
2 your public comment. Comments will be three minutes or
3 less. Thank you.

4 MR. BECKER: Yes, my name is Jason Becker,
5 J-A-S-O-N B-E-C-K-E-R, and I'm a business representative
6 for the Operating Engineers Local 12 here in Southern
7 California.

8 Many of our members, like my brother from IBEW
9 just mentioned, are local residents right here in the high
10 desert that are going to be working on this project. These
11 aren't just jobs. These are good-paying careers to
12 residents of the Mojave Desert.

13 What a lot of the opposition isn't recognizing is
14 the advancements we've had in construction technology.
15 These sites no longer require the mass grading that once
16 happened when this project was first proposed 20 years ago.
17 There's very little impact compared to previous, not only
18 the dust control, we're stewards of the environment. We
19 take pride in making sure we leave our sites cleaner than
20 when we got there. Vegetation is replaced. Native species
21 are planted. Less native species are removed in the
22 construction process. It's different than it was 20 years
23 ago. There's less material excavated out of these sites.

24 The solar panels produce more energy, so out of
25 that footprint you have more benefit to the grid than you

1 did previously.

2 And let's not forget that, when everyone mentions
3 it, it's that San Bernardino County had denied this in the
4 past. You know, at one point there was a history of
5 denying all solar projects in San Bernardino County. San
6 Bernardino was not very friendly and always the same
7 argument, it was always about the native plants, the desert
8 tortoise, the kit fox, and that argument hasn't changed.
9 But we haven't shown how the construction industry ignores
10 the effects and doesn't go far beyond to make sure there
11 isn't a negative impact.

12 All of our sites are always staffed with
13 biologists, cultural representatives, tribal
14 representatives. And if anything gets in the way of
15 construction, construction is immediately stopped to take
16 care of that, that issue, whether it be an artifact, an
17 animal, an endangered plant, to mitigate the damages that
18 occur to the environment.

19 Thank you.

20 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

21 We're next going to hear from Christina Aiello,
22 and then Scott Murtishaw.

23 Christina, please unmute on your end. I'm going
24 to, excuse me, I'm going to unmute you. Please state and
25 spell your name for the record and comments will be three

1 minutes or less.

2 MS. AIELLO: Thank you. My name is Christina
3 Aiello, that's A-I-E-L-L-O. I'm a wildlife biologist for
4 Wildlands Network, and I've studied the ecology of wildlife
5 in Southern California for 15 years, the last 8 of which
6 have been focused on desert bighorn sheep specifically. I
7 was one of the authors of the report commissioned by the
8 Park Service that specifically focused on the impacts of
9 this project on bighorn sheep, which is one of the key
10 wildlife resources within the Mojave National Preserve, but
11 also on the surrounding BLM lands and other national parks
12 in the area.

13 And I'm not here today to argue against the solar
14 development necessarily, but I'm here to argue to protect a
15 restoration effort at this site that's really been decades
16 in the making. I'm referring to the Wildlife Crossing
17 Project that's about to be built in this area. This is a
18 project that's an investment in the future of bighorn
19 populations, not just at Soda Mountain but throughout the
20 entire Mojave Desert. And this is not a cheap investment.
21 The Transportation Commission approved \$76 million to go
22 towards these three overpasses to be built, but the
23 crossing here at Soda Mountain is the highest priority of
24 these crossings.

25 And the quarter-mile buffer from the sloped areas

1 that's been proposed is not, in my scientific opinion,
2 sufficient to reduce the impacts to less than significant,
3 given the unique situation of this particular project's
4 location and its risk to this in-progress efforts to
5 restore connectivity in this region.

6 So the justifications for the proposed buffer are
7 fairly weak and stem from a very limited interpretation of
8 bighorn movement and their habitat needs. So we have
9 submitted the report that calls for three mitigation
10 measures: first, a larger buffer that's more appropriate
11 for their ecology and needs; second, delaying the project's
12 construction until the wildlife crossings are adopted; and
13 then third, re-evaluating their habitat needs at that point
14 because things are going to change and the situation is
15 going to be different.

16 So the Staff Assessment had provided no data or
17 analysis to dismiss what we had recommended, and they
18 provided our conclusions and recommendations that we had
19 submitted, but they did not adopt them as an alternative.
20 So I would urge you to say that simply looking at GPS
21 locations on a map and deciding mitigation buffers off of
22 these loose interpretations ignores the dynamic behaviors
23 of bighorn sheep and the decades of knowledge that's been
24 gained on them.

25 These animals are constantly navigating risk and

1 rewards on the landscape, and they're going to have to
2 overcome their fears in order to make this crossing
3 successful. So filling in these low-lying areas with large
4 solar construction project is the opposite of creating a
5 stable and comfortable situation for these bighorn for this
6 project, this restoration project, to be successful. So we
7 need to preserve that project, but also the connectivity
8 that already exists between the Soda and Cady Mountains.
9 The solar project overlaps with the habitat that the
10 bighorn are using to move between these mountain ranges,
11 and the project will be highly visible from the areas they
12 use the most. And bighorn make decisions based on things
13 they can see from a distance.

14 So the risks of this development are
15 disproportionately high, and we recommend you all to look
16 at our recommendations and adopt them.

17 Thank you very much.

18 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

19 Scott Murtishaw, I'm going to unmute your line.
20 Please unmute on your end. State and spell your name for
21 the record. Your comments will be three minutes or less.
22 We welcome to public comment, Scott.

23 MR. MURTISHAW: All right, thank you. Yeah, my
24 name is Scott Murtershaw, S-C-O-T-T M-U-R-T-I-S-H-A-W, and
25 I am the Executive Director of the California Energy

1 Storage Alliance. We're a trade association representing
2 approximately 80 energy storage developers, manufacturers,
3 and storage safety experts.

4 And I'm speaking today, as you might guess, to
5 express our strong support for the proposed Soda Mountain
6 Solar and Storage Project. It will provide safe, reliable,
7 and clean power to approximately 300,000 homes, and will do
8 so when energy is most needed.

9 And energy storage has already proven that it's
10 indispensable during the California summers, during record-
11 breaking heat waves. In 2020, we experienced two blackouts
12 and multiple Flex Alerts that called for customers to
13 conserve energy until the nighttime. And in 2024, with a
14 similar peak load and the hottest summer in California's
15 history, we had no blackouts and no Flex Alerts. And the
16 difference was entirely due to the addition of several
17 thousand megawatts of storage.

18 The project site is also located adjacent to
19 existing transmission corridors and major load centers, so
20 it will enable interconnection without requiring costly or
21 time-consuming upgrades. It's a strategic location to be
22 brought on quickly and cost-effectively. And I'm sure as
23 you all are aware, the governor's office estimates that
24 we'll need over 50,000 megawatts of energy storage by 2035
25 to achieve our greenhouse gas production targets. And we

1 only have about 16,000 megawatts currently available. So
2 projects like this are absolutely necessary to capture
3 renewable energy when it's abundant and then store it for
4 delivery during peak hours, reduce our reliance on
5 polluting fossil plants, cut greenhouse gases, and do all
6 of that while keeping lights on.

7 I'm sure many of you are also aware that, as a
8 previous speaker acknowledged, energy storage technologies
9 and safety regulations have evolved tremendously in just
10 the past five years. So the transition to lithium iron
11 phosphate chemistry has substantially reduced the risk of
12 fires. And accompanying that, the shift to outdoor
13 containerized projects. like this one. from the building-
14 based storage projects that were used in places like Moss
15 Landing dramatically limits the scale of potential fires,
16 usually to one or at most two containers. And to give you
17 a sense of how that compares, that would be about one
18 percent the size of the Moss Landing fire.

19 So for all of these reasons, we just effectively
20 urge you to (indiscernible).

21 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

22 Phone number ending in 644, I'm going to unmute
23 your line. Please unmute on your end by pressing star nine
24 -- excuse me, star six on your end. We welcome your public
25 comment. Please state and spell your name for the record.

1 Phone number ending in 644, press star six to unmute on
2 your end.

3 MR. PRIEST: Can you hear me?

4 MR. YOUNG: Yes, we can. Thank you.

5 MR. PRIEST: Yeah. Yeah, my name is Donald
6 Priest, D-O-N-A-L-D, Priest, P-R-I-E-S-T. I'd like to
7 thank the Commissioners for allowing me and my organization
8 to state our opposition to this project at the proposed
9 location. I'm a Board Member of the California Chapter of
10 the Wild Sheep Foundation. For decades, our mission has
11 been to promote, enhance, and increase California's native
12 bighorn sheep in our California deserts.

13 Again, we are strongly opposed to the Soda
14 Mountain Solar Project proposal. And this opposition
15 included a large coalition of wildlife conservation
16 organizations that have also written to the Commission.
17 This project would be disastrous to our varied and iconic
18 California desert wildlife species. And the Commission has
19 this information from the leading desert bighorn sheep
20 biologists that have made this clear. And I believe that
21 they've already spoken.

22 We're disappointed the Commission did not put
23 forward an alternative that includes the recommended
24 buffers and other mitigation measures that the desert
25 bighorn sheep biologists experts had submitted, which is

1 within the report commissioned by the National Park
2 Service. Unfortunately, the Commission is ignoring the
3 science on this matter and has not responded to the
4 information submitted to it.

5 The proposed project location is within and
6 adjacent to sensitive desert bighorn sheep habitat, as well
7 as the \$35 million taxpayer-funded Wildlife Crossing there
8 at Soda Mountain. Over 40 conservation organizations work
9 to attain that over-crossing as mitigation to the
10 Brightline high-speed rail line that is being built within
11 the median of Interstate 15. This crossing is imperative
12 to the survival of desert bighorn sheep, as it allows for
13 sheep to move in search of resources, and most importantly,
14 for genetic diversity.

15 This region of the California desert that
16 includes the Mojave National Preserve is not merely just
17 public land, but a living legacy, a place where generations
18 of Californians have recreated, observed wildlife, and
19 participated in its (indiscernible) activities. This
20 project would be disruptive to those activities by
21 Californians and our responsible land stewardship heritage.

22 Californians expect renewable energy development
23 to be responsibly sited in locations that minimize the
24 impact on native wildlife, local communities, and
25 California's ecosystem. In this case, responsible means

1 that the Commission should reject this project as proposed
2 and require its relocation to a less sensitive area.

3 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

4 Joan Taylor, I'm going to unmute your line.
5 Please unmute on your end. State and spell your name for
6 the record. And comments will be three minutes or less.

7 MS. TAYLOR: Thank you. Good afternoon. My name
8 is Joan Taylor. I'm a Chair of the California/Nevada
9 Desert Committee of Sierra Club. Moises Cisneros, Sierra
10 Club staff with Beyond Coal has been trying to get in by
11 phone, but the idea isn't working. I will read his
12 statement to you, and it represents Sierra Club's input at
13 this point.

14 "My name is Moises Cisneros. I'm a resident of San
15 Bernardino County, and I'm here representing the
16 Sierra Club and its members who are impacted by your
17 decisions on the Soda Mountain Project.

18 "We support renewable energy development, which is why
19 we collaborated with the private and public sector,
20 elected officials, and community leaders for just
21 about 10 years to create the California Desert
22 Renewable Energy Plan, also known as DRECP. At its
23 core, DRECP is about doing energy right. If
24 renewables are proposed on public lands, they should
25 be sited on lower conflict lands.

1 "For developers, it means access to a huge swath of
2 desert land for solar development to bring certainty
3 and efficiency to each project.

4 "For communities and conservation groups, it means
5 progress that doesn't totally sacrifice the very
6 landscapes we're trying to protect.

7 "The proposed Soda Mountain Project is not within one
8 of DRECP's solar zones and would bring significant
9 negative impacts to Big Horn Sheep, Mojave Preserve,
10 and the \$35 million Wildlife Crossing that California
11 taxpayers have already funded.

12 "The DRECP provides clear guidance on where renewable
13 energy is most appropriate. That upfront clarity
14 reduces permitting risk, shortens timelines, and
15 lowers the chance of costly delays, lawsuits, or
16 project redesigns. By steering development away from
17 sensitive habitats and cultural sites, developers
18 avoid mitigation surprises, legal challenges, and
19 reputational risk. Predictability saves money,
20 especially at the scale we are discussing today.

21 "The Soda Mountain Project would be better served
22 where it is welcomed and within the auspices of the
23 DRECP."

24 Thank you very much.

25 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

1 Laura Cunningham, I'm opening your line. Please
2 unmute on your end and spell your name for the record.
3 Your comments will be three minutes or less.

4 MS. CUNNINGHAM: Hello. Can you hear me?

5 MR. YOUNG: Yes, we can. Thank you. Yes, we
6 can.

7 MS. CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, Laura Cunningham,
8 C-U-N-N-I-N-G-H-A-M. And I think today I'm going to speak
9 as a landowner in the Cima, California area and in holding
10 in the Mojave National Preserve.

11 I really value that we have these public lands
12 that are for recreation and visual beauty and biodiversity.
13 And I'm very concerned that utility-scale solar projects
14 such as Soda Mountain are just right there, so close to the
15 boundary of this National Park Unit, instead of on a
16 brownfield or, better yet, distributed solar on rooftops,
17 over parking lots in cities and in the load centers.

18 So I'm just going to keep this quick. I strongly
19 oppose this project for all the excellent comments that
20 have been stated, and I will be sending in detailed written
21 comments.

22 Thank you.

23 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

24 I'm not seeing any further raised hands on Zoom.
25 I would like to make one more call for folks in the room.

1 If anyone didn't have a chance to give their public
2 comment, please approach the podium.

3 All right, seeing none, back to you, Kaycee.
4 That concludes public comment.

5 It looks like we have one more raised hand that
6 popped up on Zoom. Rhay, I'm going to unmute your line.
7 Please unmute on your end, state and spell your name for
8 the record, and we welcome your comments.

9 MS. FLORES: Hi, I'm Ray Flores. That's R-H-A-Y,
10 Flores, F-L-O-R-E-S. I am a steward and resident of the
11 CSU Desert Studies Center in Zzyzx, actually just south of
12 Baker and very close to the proposed solar development,
13 although I'm speaking on behalf of myself as a private
14 citizen and not representing my employer.

15 But I would like to voice my strong opposition to
16 this project for all of the reasons that the many
17 scientists you have heard from today have already
18 discussed. And I would like to reiterate that I think many
19 of the scientists that have spoken in opposition would
20 probably also not be in opposition to solar development in
21 general. You know, renewable energy is sort of one of
22 those -- it is an alternative to the fossil fuel and
23 climate crisis, but you cannot solve the climate crisis by
24 exacerbating the biodiversity crisis.

25 I'm informally a botanist, and I would like to

1 state that there's also a really large professional
2 conference happening for California botanists, which might
3 explain why there are very few botanists represented as
4 public commenters.

5 But reading the Staff Assessment that the CEC has
6 shared recently, it showed that they had surveys for their,
7 you know, plants from April to May, but many of the rare
8 plant species that actually occur adjacent and within the
9 proposed study area begin to flower in June and July. And
10 the nature of these plants being annuals, and especially in
11 desert environments, is that they can be really difficult
12 to find. They may not come up this year, they may not have
13 come up the year that they were doing those surveys, but
14 maybe the next year or the year after that. So it's really
15 hard to know if they are present or absent. And these are
16 all species that, you know, exist in the desert and rely on
17 this habitat and would be irreversibly damaged given the
18 nature of this development.

19 And that's not to say that solar development
20 doesn't have a place in our state. It's that this is not
21 the place, as all of the scientists have been strongly
22 urging you.

23 So I would like to just keep it short. I am in
24 strong opposition to this project.

25 MR. YOUNG: Randy Banis, I understand you've been

1 trying to make public comment. I'm going to unmute your
2 line. Please state and spell your name for the record, and
3 we welcome your comment. Randy Banas?

4 MR. BANIS: Thank you for calling on me again.
5 My name is Randy Banis, B, as in boy, -A-N-I-S. I am the
6 President of Friends of El Mirage.

7 The OHV, or off-highway vehicle, community has
8 long held an interest in the Soda Mountain Solar Project,
9 primarily due to its immediate proximity to the Razor OHV
10 Recreation Area. Long ago, a project footprint was
11 proposed that would have included OHV Area land.

12 Since that time, DRECP excluded renewable energy
13 development from the OHV Area, and shortly thereafter,
14 Congress, through the Dingell Act, granted even stronger
15 protections to Razor. This project respects those
16 exclusions and has made every effort to be a good neighbor
17 to the OHV enthusiasts. I'd like to thank the project for
18 working with Friends of El Mirage.

19 Thank you, Commission, for the opportunity to
20 speak today.

21 MR. YOUNG: Thank you.

22 Kaycee, that concludes public comment. Back to
23 you.

24 MS. CHANG: Thank you, Ryan, and thank you all
25 for your comments today on the Staff Assessment.

1 Written comments can be submitted to the project
2 docket until 5:00 p.m. on February 27th, 2026. We will
3 respond to all comments raising significant environmental
4 issues and make edits to analysis, if necessary, in the
5 Updated Staff Assessment, which will be filed by March
6 27th, 2026, along with the Executive Director's
7 recommendation. The CEC is planning to consider the Soda
8 Mountain Solar Project's Opt-In application at the April
9 27th, 2026, business meeting, and that will be formally
10 noticed.

11 I would now like to invite Commissioner Gallardo
12 to make closing comments.

13 COMMISSIONER GALLARDO: Hello, everyone. Just in
14 general, I want to express gratitude for everybody who
15 participated in the candid comments that were made, whether
16 that was folks in the room or folks who are on Zoom. We
17 encourage you to join us at that business meeting. And in
18 the meantime, too, if there are any other comments,
19 information, data, et cetera, that you would like for us to
20 consider, then please make sure to file those to our
21 docket.

22 And I wanted to say that our Public Advisor's
23 Office is here. They do want to speak to anyone who wants
24 to submit comments, especially the comments that we got in
25 writing today. If you could wait a little bit and make

1 sure to connect with them, that would be really helpful.

2 We also really appreciate a San Bernardino County
3 Fire representative being here. I also would like to
4 connect to make sure we have the correct contact
5 information to ensure that you have all the details you
6 need.

7 So I don't think there's anything else. Thank
8 you to the staff again for being here. Most of us spent a
9 whole day getting here and being here, but again, it's a
10 beautiful area. We always receive a warm welcome. We
11 appreciate that.

12 And finally, I wanted to thank our interpreters
13 in the back for providing their services to help ensure our
14 Spanish-speaking community can also participate, and to the
15 staff at our venue here who are so helpful and set up
16 really well so that we could have a smooth event today, so
17 I thank you so much.

18 And with that, we'll adjourn.

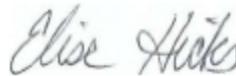
19 (The meeting adjourned at 3:35 p.m.)
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25

CERTIFICATE OF REPORTER

I do hereby certify that the testimony in the foregoing hearing was taken at the time and place therein stated; that the testimony of said witnesses were reported by me, a certified electronic court reporter and a disinterested person, and was under my supervision thereafter transcribed into typewriting.

And I further certify that I am not of counsel or attorney for either or any of the parties to said hearing nor in any way interested in the outcome of the cause named in said caption.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this 24th day of February, 2026.



ELISE HICKS, IAPRT CERT**2176

CERTIFICATE OF TRANSCRIBER

I do hereby certify that the testimony in the foregoing hearing was taken at the time and place therein stated; that the testimony of said witnesses were transcribed by me, a certified transcriber and a disinterested person, and was under my supervision thereafter transcribed into typewriting.

And I further certify that I am not of counsel or attorney for either or any of the parties to said hearing nor in any way interested in the outcome of the cause named in said caption.

I certify that the foregoing is a correct transcript, to the best of my ability, from the electronic sound recording of the proceedings in the above-entitled matter.



MARTHA L. NELSON, CERT**367

February 24, 2026