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Formal Opposition to the Soda Mountain Solar Project -- Ecological Impacts on Wildlife Connectivity and Avian Mortality

Additional submitted attachment is included below.



SCI CA Coalition

April 23, 2026

The Honorable Gavin Newsom, Governor
1021 O Street, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Formal Opposition to the Soda Mountain Solar Project – Ecological Impacts on Wildlife Connectivity and Avian Mortality

Dear Governor Newsom,

I am writing to formally express opposition to the Soda Mountain Solar Project and requesting that you direct your appointees to reject the project. While solar projects may have less impact in certain areas, the specific siting of this project poses significant, scientifically documented risks to regional biodiversity and essential wildlife corridors.

Our primary concerns are supported by the following ecological data and research:

1. Disruption of Bighorn Sheep Connectivity

The project site is a vital movement corridor for the Desert Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*). Research by Epps et al. (2007, 2013) and Creech et al. (2014) highlights this area as a high conservation priority for maintaining metapopulation connectivity in the southeastern Mojave. The installation of 8-foot-tall security fencing will effectively block movement between the Soda and Cady Mountains, isolating a herd estimated at up to 100 individuals and undermining the planned wildlife crossings for the Brightline West high-speed rail project. I fought to include these wildlife crossings to increase connectivity and provide for more genetic diversity for the wildlife populations that are already impacted by freeways and would be more impacted by Brightline West. These are the same reasons your administration designated nearly \$80 million in taxpayer funding, likely to grow to over \$100 million, for the Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing in Southern California.

You touted the Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing as a landmark victory for biodiversity, yet you appear willing to undermine this conservation narrative with the approval of the Soda Mountain Solar Project. While the Annenberg Crossing aims to save mountain lions from genetic isolation in Agoura Hills, the Soda Mountain Solar facility would occupy nearly 2,000 acres of critical desert habitat directly adjacent to Mojave National Preserve. Biologists warn that the solar farm's massive array of panels and security fencing could discourage bighorn sheep from using the three planned wildlife crossings over Interstate

15, potentially rendering those multimillion-dollar structures ineffective. This creates a serious policy contradiction: spending record taxpayer funds to bridge habitats in one region while simultaneously greenlighting industrial infrastructure that could permanently block movement corridors for critically endangered Mojave desert tortoises and bighorn sheep in another.

2. The "Lake Effect" and Avian Mortality

The "lake effect" hypothesis suggests that migrating birds mistake reflective photovoltaic (PV) arrays for bodies of water. Studies synthesized by the U.S. Geological Survey (2023) and CEC (2024) confirm that water-obligate birds are frequently attracted to these facilities, leading to collision-related trauma or "stranding". Reports from similar California projects recorded over 3,500 avian mortalities across 183 species in a four-year period. Siting this project just 8 km from the Zzyzx wetlands creates a high-risk ecological trap for the Pacific Flyway.

3. Failure of Standard Mitigation Strategies

History shows that common mitigation efforts in the Mojave Desert often fail to protect sensitive species:

Translocation Failures: The translocation of Mojave Desert Tortoises (*Gopherus agassizii*) has a "checkered history of success," particularly for reptiles. At the nearby Ivanpah project, initial estimates of dozens of tortoises were vastly exceeded, resulting in the capture of hundreds and significantly higher mortality than predicted.

Ineffective Buffer Zones: Experts from the National Parks Conservation Association argue that proposed bighorn sheep buffer zones are often less than half the size required by biological standards to maintain functional movement.

Habitat Restoration Lags: Research into "halos" and site preparation at Ivanpah shows that industrial bulldozing creates nearly uninhabitable soil conditions, making successful on-site restoration virtually impossible.

4. Desert Tortoise and Burrowing Owl Habitat Fragmentation

The project would eliminate approximately 4 square miles of habitat for species recently elevated to candidate status, such as the Burrowing Owl, and federally threatened species like the Desert Tortoise. This fragmentation, combined with groundwater extraction that threatens the springs at Zzyzx, poses an "irreparable" risk to the Mojave National Preserve's ecosystem.

In conclusion, the Soda Mountain Solar Project prioritizes short-term energy gains over the long-term biological integrity of the Mojave ecosystem. I urge you to direct your appointees at the California Energy Commission to reject the project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lisa C. McNamee".

Lisa McNamee
Director
SCI California Coalition

cc: California Energy Commission
California Fish and Game Commission
California Department of Fish and Wildlife