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In 'Funnel Effect' Discussion, Fish & Wildlife to Further Study Solar Power Towers

by [Chris Clarke](#)

on November 15, 2013 2:54 PM



Migrating monarch butterflies like these are indeed vulnerable to solar power tower plants | Photo: [Tamy Hall/Flickr/Creative Commons License](#)

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has responded to [our story](#) on its comments about a "funnel effect" at an unnamed solar facility.

The quick take: ReWire nailed its identification of the unnamed solar facility in question, BrightSource Energy's Ivanpah project. We also accurately described a possible ecological trap from the project's unanticipated attractiveness to insects, which could result in exposing an entire flying food chain to risks.

But according to Jane Hendron, Public Affairs Division Chief at the Carlsbad office of USFWS, the "funnel effect" mentioned in the agency's comments on the proposed Palen

Solar Electric Generating Station isn't really an "effect," and it involves an actual funnel - or at least something that works like one.

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Here's the passage that triggered our interest from the USFWS comments on the Palen project, from a section discussing the monitoring for wildlife mortality USFWS would like to see. (Those comments, by the way, have now been substantially duplicated in [USFWS's comments on the parallel California Energy Commission \(CEC\) proceedings on Palen.](#))

The plan should include daily checks for bird mortalities in the areas cleared of vegetation under the towers in response to the funnel effect of dead birds recently observed at another power tower facility.

The comments didn't explain that "funnel effect" further. On Thursday, we hypothesized that "another power tower facility" referred to Ivanpah, and that the passage might refer to a so-called "ecological trap" phenomenon in which the bright lights attract insects, which could then attract small birds and bats, which themselves would attract larger birds of prey to the site. Wildlife attracted to an operating solar power tower site can fall prey to injuries from the project's concentrated solar energy, or collisions with mirrors and other structures.

Hendron told ReWire Friday that USFWS is indeed concerned with just that possibility. "We didn't anticipate the insect issue, to be frank," said Hendron. "A Service staff member made a personal observation of a large number of insects attracted to the power towers at Ivanpah on a recent visit to the site. We're going to be paying close attention to this, because it does indeed raise the possibility you described."

But the "funnel effect" mentioned in the USFWS comments? "We may need to revise those comments," Hendron told ReWire. "Effect' isn't really the right word. That passage refers to a *structure* at the base of each power tower at Ivanpah. Those structures have been found to collect killed and injured wildlife, along with leaves and other debris."

The structures themselves do not seem to pose a direct threat to wildlife, Hendron said, but merely collect bodies of wildlife killed or injured by other factors. The recommendation in the comments merely suggested that any similar structures at Palen be diligently monitored for injured or killed wildlife.

That suggestion comes in the context of fairly stringent USFWS recommendations for monitoring programs at Palen, including a request that a third party monitoring program be set up, paid for by either CEC or the Bureau of Land Management or both, in which independent scientists scour the project site at frequent intervals to collect independently verifiable information on wildlife injuries at Palen.

"Our problem all along has been that the information is difficult to come by," Hendron said. "Project owners have different wildlife 'take' reporting requirements, and they provide that information to either the CEC or BLM, and not to us. What we really need is a coherent way for someone to gather all those reports, verify and collate them so that we have reliable and consistent information."

Hendron said that a plan for broader, more consistent wildlife mortality monitoring and reporting at renewable energy projects is in the works, and that USFWS will be releasing a description of that plan in the next couple of weeks. A peer-reviewed USFWS forensics report on wildlife killed at solar facilities is expected to be published early in 2014.

"That data will help us do our jobs more effectively," said Hendron. "We do need new sources of energy, but the Service has a responsibility to protect wildlife in trust for the American people. Our policies have to be based on scientific data that's as accurate as we can obtain. That's hasn't been easy to come by with technology as new as these power tower projects. But we're paying very close attention, and we will be crafting rules based on that science as it comes in."