

1.0 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The County of Imperial (County) has updated the existing 2006 Geothermal/Alternative Energy and Transmission Element and associated implementing ordinances. This seventh (7th) element update was initiated by a Grant the County received from the California Energy Commission’s Renewable Energy and Conservation Planning Grant Program. While the existing element focused on geothermal renewable energy resources, the element update presents a broader focus that takes into account additional forms of renewable energy, including wind, solar, deep solar ponds, biofuel, bio-mass, algae production, concentrated solar-thermal power, and concentrated photovoltaics. Consequently, the new element has been retitled as the *Renewable Energy and Transmission Element* update (proposed Project).

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires State and local public agencies to prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) prior to approving any project that may have a significant effect on the environment. According to CEQA, a “project” is defined as the whole of an action that has the potential to result in a direct physical change or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment (CEQA Guidelines, Section 15378[a]). The proposed Project is located within Imperial County and meets the definition of a “project” as defined by CEQA.

The County of Imperial is the lead agency for the preparation of this Programmatic EIR under CEQA and is responsible for conducting the environmental review and certifying the Final Programmatic EIR. Likewise, consistent with the requirements of CEQA, the County will use the Programmatic EIR as a decision-making tool to assist with its determination whether to approve, modify, or deny the proposed Project. This Draft Programmatic EIR describes the existing environment and evaluates the project-level and cumulative impacts of the proposed Project and alternatives in accordance with the provisions set forth in the CEQA Guidelines. This Programmatic EIR will be used to address potentially significant environmental issues and recommend adequate and feasible mitigation measures, where possible, that would reduce or eliminate potentially significant environmental impacts.

1.2 TYPE OF DOCUMENT

This EIR has been prepared as a Programmatic EIR pursuant to CEQA Guidelines, Section 15168. The CEQA Guidelines allow a Programmatic EIR to be prepared for “...a series of actions that can be characterized as one large project and are related either:

- (1) Geographically,
- (2) As logical parts in the chain of contemplated actions,
- (3) In connection with issuance of rules, regulations, plans, or other general criteria to govern the conduct of a continuing program, or
- (4) As individual activities carried out under the same authorizing statutory or regulatory authority and having generally similar environmental effects which can be mitigated in similar ways...”

Completion of the Programmatic EIR will allow future individual renewable energy projects to “tier” off this environmental document. The CEQA Guidelines define tiering as “...the coverage of general matters and environmental effects in an environmental impact report prepared for a policy, plan, program or

ordinance followed by narrower or site-specific environmental impact reports which incorporate by reference the discussion in any prior environmental impact report and which concentrate on the environmental effects which (a) are capable of being mitigated, or (b) were not analyzed as significant effects on the environment in the prior environmental impact report (Section §21068.5)...”

Future renewable energy projects developed per the proposed Project would need to be reviewed in the context of this Programmatic EIR to determine if additional environmental documentation would be required. If the subsequent renewable energy project would have environmental effects not addressed in the Programmatic EIR, additional environmental review would be required. If additional impacts are not identified and no new mitigation measures would be required, the subsequent renewable energy project could be approved without additional environmental documentation. If an EIR were required for a subsequent renewable energy project, the EIR should implement the applicable mitigation measures developed in the Programmatic EIR and focus its analysis on specific environmental impacts that were not previously addressed.

The County prepared an Initial Study and subsequently issued a Notice of Preparation (NOP) for the preparation of environmental document on July 21, 2014. The NOP was distributed to city, County, State, and federal agencies; military bases; local Native American Tribes; other public agencies; and various interested private organizations and individuals to define the scope of the environmental document. The purpose of the NOP was to identify public agency and public concerns regarding the potential impacts of the proposed Project and the scope and content of environmental issues to be addressed in the environmental document. Circulation of the NOP for public comment ended on August 22, 2014. The NOP, Initial Study, and comments received from agencies and various interested private organizations and individuals are presented in Appendix A.

The review period for the Draft Programmatic EIR prepared for the proposed Project will be 50 days (45 days minimum per the CEQA guidelines, plus 5 additional days). On January 6, 2015, a Notice of Completion (NOC) for the Draft Programmatic EIR was filed with the Office of Planning & Research/State Clearinghouse, initiating the 50-day public review period. The public review period on the Draft Programmatic EIR ends on February 25, 2015, after which time the County will respond to all comments received.

Concurrent with filing the NOC, the County is also required to provide a Notice of Availability (NOA) to inform the public, agencies, organizations, and other interested parties of the availability of the Draft Programmatic EIR. The NOA was published on January 6, 2015, in both regional and local newspapers, posted at the County’s website, in Spanish newspaper and television, and local libraries. Public comments on the Draft environmental document will be accepted in written form and should be directed to:

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Director, Planning & Development Services Department
County of Imperial
Planning & Development Services
801 Main Street
El Centro, CA 92243
JimMinnick@co.imperial.ca.us

1.3 INTENDED USE OF THE EIR

As the Lead Agency for this project, The County would use this Programmatic EIR to evaluate development of future renewable energy facilities per the proposed Project. The County will consider the findings of the Final Programmatic EIR, in light of the entire administrative record, before certifying the Final Programmatic EIR document and taking legislative action on the project. In addition, the project will be subject to various federal and State laws, some of which could require regulatory action or approval by other government agencies.

1.4 PROGRAMMATIC EIR ORGANIZATION AND SCOPE

Executive Summary: This chapter provides a summary of the proposed Project, including a summary matrix of Project impacts, mitigation measures, and alternatives to the proposed Project.

Chapter 1.0: Introduction: This chapter explains the purpose and intended uses of the document and provides a summary of the background, terminology and overview of the proposed Project.

Chapter 2.0: Project Description: This chapter provides a detailed description of the proposed Project. This chapter begins with a description of the proposed Project objectives and a discussion of the relationship of the proposed Project to the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP), followed by a detailed description of each of the components of the proposed Project. This chapter also discusses the relationship of the proposed Project to other elements of the General Plan and relevant regulatory requirements.

Chapter 3.0: Introduction To The Environmental Impact Analysis: This chapter provides an introduction to the environmental impacts analyses and general assumptions used in the environmental document and cumulative analyses presented in Chapter 4.0.

Chapter 4.0: Environmental Impact Analysis: provides an analysis of the environmental impacts of the projects for all environmental categories listed on the CEQA Checklist. This chapter also identifies mitigation measures to address potential impacts associated with the proposed Project.

Chapter 5.0: Alternatives: This chapter qualitatively analyzes impacts associated with alternatives to the proposed Project relative to impacts resulting from the proposed Project.

Chapter 6.0: Growth Inducement: This chapter analyzes the potential for the proposed Project to induce growth.

1.5 IMPACT TERMINOLOGY

Terms that are frequently used in this Programmatic EIR are defined below to aid the reader in understanding the meaning of the language used throughout the document.

Cumulatively Considerable: A cumulatively considerable impact would result when effects from the project would contribute a significant physical impact on the environment when added to other approved, proposed, or reasonably foreseeable projects.

Less than Cumulatively Considerable: A less than cumulatively considerable impact would result when effects of the project would not contribute a significant physical impact on the environment when added to other approved, proposed, or reasonably foreseeable projects.

Less than Significant Impact: A less than significant impact is adverse but would cause no substantial change in the environment and would not require mitigation.

No Impact: No adverse impact to the environment would occur as a result of the project.

Significant Impact: A significant impact exceeds the defined CEQA thresholds of significance. A significant impact would potentially cause a substantial adverse change in the environment and would require mitigation to eliminate the impact or reduce it to less than significant.

Significant and Unavoidable: A significant and unavoidable impact cannot be eliminated or reduced to a less than significant level through mitigation incorporation.

Standards of Significance: Standards, or “thresholds,” of significance used by Imperial County for the purpose of this Programmatic EIR are based on CEQA Guidelines, scientific data, regulatory performance standards of federal, State, and local agencies, and County goals, objectives, and policies.