

The Environmental Spectator

Frying Birds in Midair

Feds freak out over solar energy.

By Greg Walcher – 8.25.14

At the most modern solar power plant in the world, researchers are now saying the magnified sun rays are setting birds on fire in midair — by the thousands. They call them “streamers,” because of the smoke plume that is quite visible as they ignite and plummet to earth. Stories of the scorched birds were so widespread that alert investigators from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided to visit the plant — built by BrightSource Energy near the California/Nevada border. The Feds watched in horror as they saw an average of one “streamer” every two minutes.

Coincidentally, the company is asking California regulators to approve an even larger version of the solar plant, and the Feds are — predictably — urging the state to halt the application until more Feds can conduct more studies.

The Ivanpah Solar Electric Generating System is an amazing engineering achievement, harnessing the sun’s energy on a massive scale. The \$2.2 billion plant, just launched this spring, is the world’s largest solar thermal plant. Some 300,000 mirrors reflect solar rays onto three boiler towers, each the height of a 40-story building. The water inside is heated to produce steam, turning turbines that can generate 392 megawatts a year, enough electricity to power 140,000 homes. A federal government that claims to encourage such renewable energy ought to be proud, but instead wants to hit the brakes.

The rash of sensational news stories about fried birds is not surprising — for two reasons:

First, any kid who ever used a magnifying glass to scorch ants could tell them that if you focus the sun’s rays that intently, anything in the path will get burned. We also learn at a very young age that light attracts bugs. Thus, if you fill the desert with intensely focused light it will attract legions of bugs, which will attract legions of birds. Estimates of the number of birds fried while flying through the area range from at least 1,000 to as many as 28,000 a year.

Second, some federal agency can always be counted on to oppose anything — especially any use of any form of energy anywhere at any time. The coal industry is struggling to survive the EPA’s newly proposed greenhouse gas regulations, the effect of which will be to essentially ban coal-fired power plants. The feeding frenzy about “fracking” has spawned political initiatives across the country seeking to ban drilling for oil and gas, and the EPA also wants to federalize that issue. The Obama Interior Department imposed a moratorium on further leasing of oil shale lands (with deposits equal to all the known oil reserves of the world). The fledgling biomass energy industry is still sputtering in the West because the Forest Service does not make enough timber available to create significant energy. Finally, numerous organizations are up in arms about the impact of wind farms on birds, some threatening to sue the Administration for granting waivers to the wind industry.

Combine these two facts and you have the perfect recipe for controversy, so lots of tax money will be spent fighting, and defending, the newly proposed solar expansion. We can look forward to more studies, from the federal agencies themselves and from their friends in the environmental industry. And just in case you think federal agencies are consistent, the Fish and Wildlife Service is in the same Department as the BLM, which owns the land and permitted the Ivanpah plant.

In their defense, the plant's owners are saying that not all the "streamers" are birds. Some of them, they say, are actually insects. If so, shouldn't the Feds be shocked at that? Never mind the need for electricity at 140,000 homes — let's worry about the callousness of a corporation that thinks it's OK to fry insects like schoolboys with a magnifying glass!

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